

SPECIOUS POISONS?:
REPUTATION, GENDER, AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

ERIN N. TAYLOR: *Specious Poisons?: Reputation, Gender, and Democratic Politics*
(Under the direction of Susan Bickford.)

Suggesting that reputation and gossip have been largely ignored by contemporary political theorists, I argue that both reputation and the gossip that helps to constitute it are important aspects of our communal and political lives. I begin with the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as representative of a larger early modern discourse that identified the desire for reputation as one that is central to human beings. Arguing that this desire for reputation simultaneously poses great dangers and great power for political communities, Rousseau's vision urges careful attention to political arrangements as a way of harnessing the positive effects of the desire for reputation. In my second chapter, I move to a focus on the relationship between reputation and gender, interrogating the necessity that women maintain spotless sexual reputations (a central feature to Rousseau's political schema) in light of both Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau as well as my examination of the fate of Rousseau's heroines. Turning to the work of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill, I contend that their arguments about the stifling effects of reputational politics for individual liberty point to a nuanced understanding of the differential effects of reputation for individuals in various echelons of society. Chapter 4 takes up George Orwell's novel *Burmese Days* as well as his essay "Shooting an Elephant" to think about the ways in which reputation and gossip work in contexts of radical differences of power. While both of these works are situated in the colonial context, I argue that Orwell's observations about the functions of

gossip and reputation within relationships of incommensurate power are instructive beyond the colonial setting. Finally, in Chapter 5, I turn to contemporary political events to explore the previous chapters' themes of community, gender, individual liberty, and power through the lens of sexual reputation and the gossip that surfaced during the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal.

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INTRODUCTION

My dissertation project is motivated by several questions that center on the role that reputation plays in democratic political life. As a form of communication that is constitutive of certain forms of reputation, in what ways does gossip become salient for political communities? How is reputation deployed through gossip in the interest of power by individuals, groups, and even government? How does the desire for reputation work to constrain women in particular? Finally, what are the dangers of reputation and gossip for a diverse political community? All of these questions suggest that there is something to be gained for democratic politics in a better understanding of how gossip and reputation work.

I begin to think about these questions with an examination of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's arguments about the place of reputation in political life, with a focus on Rousseau's argument that the desire for reputation can be used to shape communities. Representative of a larger discourse about reputation that was espoused by early modern thinkers such as Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and Ferdinando Galiani, I contend that Rousseau's assertion that the desire for reputation is a primary human motivation has weighty consequences for his political philosophy. On the one hand, he argues, the desire for reputation can lead to a host of social and political problems: a dangerous lack of moral, intellectual, and personal autonomy; the potential for serious moral failure; an absence of innovation; and social alienation. At the same time, however, Rousseau also insists that the desire for reputation can and should in fact be used to constructively shape political communities. While his stance on reputation appears ambiguous at first glance, I maintain

that with a careful attention to context, Rousseau's argument becomes clear: by engineering social and political arrangements in such a way that the desire for reputation is harnessed to elicit the virtues required for citizenship, he argues, communities can take advantage of this desire as a powerful political tool, rather than allowing it to devolve into the dangers he enumerates. Further, Rousseau suggests, gossip plays a vital role in ensuring that the desire for reputation is deployed correctly, both by constituting and policing reputation.

In Chapter 2, I examine the relationship between gender and reputation, moving to a more focused discussion of the role of women's sexual reputations in Rousseau's philosophy. As a necessary precondition for the creation of the family, of citizens, and of male citizenship, Rousseau posits, the female reputation for chasteness requires that women be held to different standards than men. While Rousseau wants to argue that the centrality of their sexuality to his political vision gives women covert power over men, Mary Wollstonecraft's critique suggests that, in reality, women are rendered vapid and contemptible by their constant obsession with their own and other women's sexual respectability. Far from conferring political power, then, the necessity of nurturing impeccable sexual reputations and policing others' sexual reputation through gossip provides a fundamental basis for women's political subordination. Further, I argue that the fate of Rousseau's heroines suggests a host of other difficulties with making sexual reputation and the gossip that helps to constitute it so central to political association.

Chapter 3 turns to the thought of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill. While contemporary liberal theory has remained comparatively silent about the relationship between reputation and politics, I suggest that the Mills' work offers an account of reputation that very helpfully explores the difficult relationship between the desire for reputation and

individual liberty. Subject to gossip throughout their own lives, both Mills argue that the policing of reputation is often dangerous and inappropriate; they posit such policing as an agent of coercion that inhibits individual liberty, free speech, and experimental living. They also insist that such reputational policing keeps women subservient to men. Yet John Stuart Mill also suggests that, while law should only be applicable to other-regarding acts, reputational policing and gossip can rightfully be employed to discourage those self-regarding acts that tend toward the lower animal pleasures. Like, Rousseau, then, Mill is drawn to the attempt to harness the power of reputation despite its dangers. In doing so, however, Mill also makes some convincing arguments about the potential to resist reputational policing and the way in which the effects of such policing might be mitigated.

Chapter 4 takes up George Orwell's novel *Burmese Days* as well as his essay "Shooting an Elephant" to think about the ways in which reputation and gossip work in contexts of radical inequality. While both of these works are situated in the colonial context, I argue that Orwell's observations about the functions of gossip and reputation within relationships of incommensurate power are instructive beyond the colonial setting. Finally, in Chapter 5, I turn to contemporary political events to explore the political facets of sexual reputation and gossip that surfaced in the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal. Returning to the themes of community, gender, individuality, and power, I argue that all of these issues become salient in the events surrounding the scandal in ways that are simultaneously surprising and, given the analysis of the previous four chapters, ultimately quite familiar.

Before I move on to my first chapter, however, I would like to briefly review some of the work that has been done on gossip and to present my definitions of both gossip and

reputation. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and others have produced a vast literature about gossip; the extent to which gossip has been studied in these fields further highlights political theory's relative silence about gossip. This work can be divided into three main categories: the function of gossip in social and communal life, the economic aspects of gossip as exchange, and the psychological benefits and effects of gossip. Looking at the role of gossip in "primitive" societies, anthropologists such as Max Gluckman argue that gossip works both to maintain and reinforce social norms and to solidify social cohesion and identity (1963). As a particular way of speaking, Sally Yerkovich maintains, gossip helps to solidify interpersonal relationships (1977). Robin Dunbar, a biological anthropologist, suggests that gossip is a verbal form of the mutual grooming in which most primate groups engage (1992). Jorg Bergmann focuses on gossip's discreet nature as evidence that it allows people to overcome competing loyalties to different friends by sharing information about one with another in a way that openly betrays neither (1993). Robert Paine posits gossip as a self-interested, strategic form of information management (1967). Ralph Rosnow presents a similarly economic model of gossip, suggesting that information can be exchanged for other desirable goods (1977). Some social psychologists argue that gossip performs important functions at the individual and interpersonal levels, allowing people to inform, to influence, and to entertain (Rosnow and Gergoudi 1985). Others point out the similarities between gossip and psychotherapy, suggesting that gossip serves a therapeutic function (Medini and Rosenberg 1976). Still more psychologists focus on determining whether there are certain psychological dispositions that make people prone to gossiping (Rosnow and Fine 1976, Jaeger et al. 1994, Nevo et al. 1994).¹

¹For more work on gossip and rumor, see Almirol 1981, Bleek 1976, Colson 1953, Cox 1979, Emler 1994, Fine 1977, Freeman 2001, Herskovits 1937, Levin and Arluke 1985, Meyer Spacks 1986, Morreal 1994, Percival

More recently, moral philosophers have begun to ask more explicitly whether gossip deserves its terrible reputation. Many of these philosophers suggest that gossip's usefulness exceeds that posited by anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists; some argue that, whatever other human needs or societal functions gossip fulfills, it has important communicative, moral, and epistemological functions, as well. Maryann Ayim suggests that the activity of gossiping is in fact a form of inquiry, "a source of crucial information inaccessible by other means" (1994, 86). Lorraine Code makes a similar argument, insisting that gossip is not only "a finely tuned instrument for establishing truths about people," but that it also has the power to change people's moral views, to make them choose and declare their loyalties (1994, 101). And Ronald de Sousa maintains that gossip can be considered "an attempt by the weak, and often, though far from exclusively, by women, to use the power of knowledge independently of those who wield more conventional power" (1994, 25). Gossip, de Sousa argues, is an avenue for acquiring knowledge and engaging in discussion that is open to everyone, regardless of their social situations. Feminist thinkers have taken this work a step further, maintaining that gossip's traditional and continuing association with women is intimately connected with its derision (Ayim 1994, Collins 1994, Jones 1980, Rysman 1977).² Gossip is the language of the oppressed, they argue—no wonder mainstream religion and society hate it so. All of this work is ultimately incredibly helpful to

2000, Post 1994, Roulston 1996, Schein 1994, Schoeman 1994, Suls 1977, and Suls and Goodkin 1994. For especially interesting discussions of gossip in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, see Hunter 1994 and Dufallo 2001.

²Whether or not women actually gossip more than men is a matter of great debate by scholars of gossip. Much of this debate, it seems to me, centers upon how gossip is defined. While I provide a sustained discussion of definitions of gossip in the next section, the short version of this particular definitional dilemma is this: Some scholars want to define gossip as all easy or casual chatter, about other people, sports, politics, the weather, or any number of other topics. Others prefer a definition of gossip that characterizes it as easy or casual chatter about other people and their personal lives. If the first definition is taken, it seems that men gossip just as much as women do; when the second is engaged, however, women become the more prolific gossipers (Ben-Ze'ev 1994).

my discussion here, providing invaluable clues of issues to consider in constructing a specifically politically theoretical account of gossip.

Defining Gossip and Reputation

When of a gossiping circle it was asked, “What are they doing?” The answer was, “Swapping lies.”

Playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan easily defines gossip in his above observation. Scholars of gossip, however, have a more difficult time agreeing on a definition for the activity of gossip and its content. While some define gossip simply in ways such as “talk about other people’s activities and behaviour” (Tebbutt 1995, 1), others have developed more complex taxonomies or conditions that can be used to identify gossip (Taylor 1994, Thomas 1994). There are disagreements over whether maliciousness ought to be included as a definitional characteristic of gossip. Scholars differ, as well, about whether gossip should include all types of idle chatter or just that focused on the personal lives of others. They argue about whether the spreading of rumors should count as gossip, about how private and personal information must be to be considered gossip, about whether the content of true gossip is true, false, or some mixture of the two, and about whether gossip necessarily includes judgment of some kind or if it can be purely informational.

Ultimately, as one philosopher points out, “Definitions of gossip will always be complex and controversial” (Taylor 1994, 34). Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (1994) provides a useful way to ease these seemingly insurmountable definitional difficulties, arguing that gossip is best considered a prototypical rather than a binary category. Deeming gossip a binary category, as most of the literature has done, means an all-or-nothing inclusion or exclusion—something is either gossip, or it is not. In a prototypical category, however, membership is established through similarity to a “typical” example. “Some items are so similar to or so

different from the prototype that we have no doubt about their inclusion or exclusion; with other items the degree of similarity makes it difficult or impossible to say for sure whether they belong or not” (Ben-Ze’ev 1994, 11). Gossip is best depicted as a prototypical category because such a depiction allows for a full range of activities to be considered. For example, spreading lies about others’ personal lives can be admitted as one form of gossip without having to be the main or most common form.

Ben-Ze’ev describes gossip’s prototype as “an idle, relaxing activity whose value lies in the activity itself and not the achievement of external ends” (13). While I do not entirely disagree with this assessment, I choose to portray typical gossip slightly differently as *casual conversation about the personal lives of other people*. There are several important reasons for my choice. First, I believe it is important to characterize typical gossip as being about the personal lives of others. The motivation of thinkers who attempt to define gossip as any form of idle talk are admirable; in allowing that gossip can be about sports or the weather, for example, they challenge gossip’s traditional association with women and point out that all human beings participate in casual chatter. However, in day-to-day understandings, as well as in contemporary dictionary definitions, gossip is typically associated specifically with talk about other people’s personal lives. How often are people discussing the likelihood of a baseball strike, the Buffalo Bills’ chances at a Superbowl run, or the dreariness of a rainy day considered gossips for doing so? Further, the fact that gossip is about the personal lives of others is what makes it normatively distinct from talking about the public projections of others, such as their ideas, their speeches, or their political commentary. This aspect of my understanding of gossip, that it is about the personal lives of others, provides the non-negotiable core of my definition. While I do suggest, as indicated above, that certain forms

of talk can be admitted as gossip without being regarded as *typical* gossip, I also want to argue that when it comes to content, the definition of gossip is less malleable: talk can only be considered gossip when it is about the personal lives of others.

Second, my version of typical gossip does not include malicious or manipulative intent. Here, gossip's prototypical nature becomes important. While gossip can indeed be malicious or manipulative, I want to argue that this is not *typically* the case. Everyday conversations slide easily and idly in and out of discussion about other's personal lives; very rarely do they have any intent besides the simple sharing and subsequent discussing of information, much less the intent to purposefully harm another. Further, as Louise Collins aptly points out, "If all those who gossip admit to the aim of denigration, their co-gossips have no reason to interpret their claim about S, the subject, as telling them anything about S, except that the malicious gossip does not like her" (1994, 108). In other words, if typical gossip were malicious, its use as a tool of manipulation would soon be easily undermined, making gossip itself extinct—an event that, no matter what one's normative assessment of gossip, doesn't appear to be happening anytime soon.

Third, my gossip prototype, in suggesting that typical gossip is casual conversation, also suggests that media reports about the personal lives of public figures are not typical gossip. Such reports are not casual but are, rather, professionally produced. Further, because they are most often consumed and are not interactive, they do not properly qualify as conversation. However, media reports often do supply fodder for typical gossip. The implication here is that typical gossip can be about personal activities that have become public knowledge; the content of typical gossip need not be secret or little-known information. People often spend a great deal of time discussing in detail the very public

personal lives of well-known figures. Further, the informational content of typical gossip is often a matter of public record, even when the gossip is about everyday people. For example, two friends might gossip about the arrest of their third friend John—this is still typical gossip despite the fact that John’s arrest is duly noted in the morning paper. Though some scholars have argued that discussions about personal activities that have become public knowledge are not gossip, I see no convincing reason to exclude them from my gossip prototype.

Finally, in using the word “conversation” in my description of typical gossip, I am hoping to highlight the back-and-forth nature of most gossip. A simple report on the personal life of a mutual friend (“John got arrested last night”) is not typical gossip. Rather, typical gossip includes further discussion (“Not another DUI? I thought he quit drinking!”). This further discussion is an important feature of gossip for a very simple reason. Rarely, if ever, are people accused of gossiping *at* someone else. Rather, people gossip *with* each other. Lack of conversational response of some kind on the part of the listener, even if that response is the simple encouragement “Tell me more,” stops even the most zealous would-be gossipers.

Ultimately much less controversial than the definition of gossip, my definition of reputation is *that which is said or believed about a person’s character*. Understood in this way, part of the value of reputation becomes clear: reputation is powerful inasmuch as it shapes the way that others approach and respond to us, especially when those others know little more about us than our reputations. A good reputation can earn its holder jobs, loans, restaurant reservations, election to public office, and maybe even a greater voice in church,

school, community, state, or national affairs. A bad reputation can mean isolation and rejection—refusal of the benefits listed above as well as many others.³

The value of reputation, however, is not limited to the person who is its subject. There is power, also, in the ability to build and destroy the reputations of others. While reputations can be and often are constructed and demolished in a variety of ways by their holders, from the commission of heroic or heinous acts to the failure to act at all to the hiring of a great public relations firm, they are also by definition out of the control of the holder much of the time. Others delineate our reputations, both because of what they choose to believe about us and what they choose to say about us: “Reputations are created and conveyed by gossip” (Klein 1997, 3). This understanding about the relationship between reputation and gossip is one that is central to my project; gossip is one form of communication that is integral to both the formation and dissemination of reputation.

For early modern thinkers such as Rousseau, the desire to have others think well of us, to have a good reputation, is considered a central motivational source inherent to human beings, not just for the benefits a good reputation may confer, as discussed above, but also simply because we care how others view us. I begin my project, then, with an analysis of Rousseau’s argument about the desire for reputation, the dangers it poses to both individuals and communal life, and the strong potential it possesses to shape people into the types of citizens needed to form a robust political community.

³Certainly, what constitutes a “good” reputation or a “bad” reputation varies over time, place, and community (Bailey 1971). A reputation as an excellent gambler, for example, might bring one rewards and good esteem in Las Vegas or Atlantic City while bringing distrust and reprimand from certain religious communities. I explore this feature of reputation further in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 1

DEVOURING US ALL: ROUSSEAU, REPUTATION, AND THE SHAPING OF COMMUNITY

“I would note how much that universal desire for reputation, honors, and preferences, which devours us all, trains and compares our talents and strengths; how much it excites and multiplies the passions; and, by making all men competitors, rivals, or rather enemies, how many setbacks, successes and catastrophes of every sort it causes every day, by making so many contenders run the same course. I would show that it is to this ardor for making oneself the topic of conversation, to this furor to distinguish oneself which nearly always keeps us outside ourselves, that we owe what is best and worst among men, our virtues and vices, our sciences and our errors, our conquerors and our philosophers, that is to say, a multitude of bad things against a small number of good ones” (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 78).

Given his own reputation as a passionate writer, it is no surprise that Rousseau’s rhetoric about reputation itself is so forceful. The innate human drive for reputation, he argues here, has powerful effects on political communities, eliciting people’s best as well as their worst. At first glance, Rousseau’s stance on reputation seems at best ambivalent and at worst contradictory; on the one hand, he argues that concern with reputation is a risky vice that easily leads to a host of problems for individuals and especially communities: extreme unhappiness; a dangerous lack of moral and personal autonomy; violence; society-wide moral collapse; and alienation from others. On the other hand, the power of reputation serves, in two distinct ways, as a lynchpin of his political philosophy, providing both the basis on which families and political communities are solidified as well as a force to impel men to lives of virtuous citizenship. Without the power of reputation, some have argued, Rousseau’s entire political vision would quickly collapse. Yet, careful attention to context

reveals that Rousseau's arguments about reputation are not nearly so divergent as they might first appear. The effects that reputation has on political communities, he insists, can in fact be controlled; there are ways of structuring social relations correctly, to educe virtue, and incorrectly, to draw out vice. Left to its own devices, Rousseau warns, the desire for reputation will be corrosive and damaging, but when properly constructed, political communities can harness this desire, transforming it into a potent force to shape the citizenry.

Coming from a tradition that accepted the desire for reputation as a fundamental feature of human psychology, Rousseau is not unique in his insistence that successful political and communal arrangements require responsiveness to reputation-seeking. In fact, the early modern period was home to a strong reputational discourse that regarded the drive for distinction as an essential force that could either be channeled toward the public good or that could devolve into a focus on private interests. Adam Ferguson writes that "eminence is the principal object of pursuit" (1995, 244). Man's "desire to distinguish himself from others," Ferdinando Galiani insists, "is the very source of action in us" (2003, 313). Adam Smith argues that "as obscurity covers us from the daylight of honour and approbation, to feel that we are taken no notice of, necessarily damps the most agreeable hope, and disappoints the most ardent desire, of human nature" to "be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation" (1976, 50-51).

As an outstanding representative of early modern thought about the place of reputation in political life, Rousseau provides an excellent entry into thinking about the way in which reputation functions in political communities. His place as an exemplar of this wider reputational discourse, coupled with his secure seat in the political theory canon, make him an ideal thinker with whom to engage questions of reputation. Finally, his broad range

of works, including the epistolary novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the educational treatise *Émile*, his autobiography *The Confessions*, and his more overtly political writings construct and reconstruct the early modern discussion of reputation in several genres, offering multiple captivating perspectives from which to view this discourse.

In this chapter, I concentrate on using Rousseau to delineate the features of the early modern reputational discourse. Beginning with Rousseau's indictment of the role of reputation in corrupt commercial societies, I describe the dangerous effects for political communities and for individuals that he attributes to concern with reputation. Next, I move to Rousseau's account of the way in which concern with reputation can work as a powerful tool for shaping people into the kinds of citizens needed for strong communities, illustrating both the context and conditions for its effectiveness. Finally, I introduce Rousseau's account of gossip as a form of communication central to reputational discourse, examining the role of different forms of reputation in modern political societies in particular. Ultimately, I posit gossip as a form of communication that is central to both the creation and maintenance of certain forms of reputation, as well as to sustaining the tenets of the reputational discourse that Rousseau represents.

Worst Among Citizens: The Dangers of Reputation in Commercial Society

As a social critic, Rousseau passionately and eloquently condemns the effects of reputation seeking among his contemporaries. In a context in which wealth and wit confer more status than courage, vigor, commitment to public good, and the other virtues necessary to securing a strong civic community, Rousseau argues, the desire for reputation becomes corrosive, presenting a host of dangers to both communities and the individuals that comprise them. Seeking status by working to appear to be witty or wealthy, people neglect those sorts

of virtues that Rousseau identifies as vital to the community. His most serious lamentation over the concern with reputation in corrupt societies is the way in which such concern fosters a lack of autonomy (no doubt a function of his own life of dependence upon patrons and benefactors, as well as his own obsessive anxiety about his reputation).⁴ Dependent upon the opinions of others for moral guidance, self esteem, and even happiness and material support, like Rousseau himself, those individuals focused on their reputations in such social contexts fall prey to a litany of ills; it is this dependence upon the opinions of others from which many of the evils of reputation seeking spring. The dire effects of preoccupation with reputation in these contexts extend beyond the individual to poison social interactions, stifle the community's morality, and even suppress true innovation in the arts and sciences. Rousseau even argues that it is the desire for esteem that helped to propel human beings from their natural state of harmony into a morass of competition and inequality. At his most passionate when he is castigating these dangerous effects of reputation, Rousseau bemoans its destructive potential: "O fury to gain distinction, of what are you not capable?" (*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 12).

Social Losses

Rousseau's most overtly political writings focus his discussion of reputation on the damaging effects of concern with reputation on an already corrupt society. His description of the logic of inequality, narrated as the story of human evolution from an imagined state of nature to modern communities, relies heavily on the desire for esteem. In the purest form of this state of nature, he argues, "...men were not subject to very dangerous conflicts. Since they had no sort of intercourse among themselves; since, as a consequence, they knew neither

⁴For an interesting discussion of how *The Confessions* can be read, in part, as a defense of Rousseau's reputation, see Kelly 2001.

vanity, nor deference, nor esteem, nor contempt...their disputes would rarely have had bloody consequences” (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 55). A world in which human beings could not even recognize each other, encountering others infrequently and sporadically, would hardly be conducive to the building of reputations or the conferral of esteem. But as people began living together, Rousseau argues, the desire for reputation reared its ugly head. This is where, he insists, everything went wrong:

“Each one began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had a value. The one who sang or danced the best, the handsomest, the strongest, the most adroit or the most eloquent became the most highly regarded. And this was the first step toward inequality and, at the same time, toward vice. From these first preferences were born vanity and contempt on the one hand, and shame and envy on the other. And the fermentation caused by these new leavens eventually produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence” (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 64).

As soon as human beings discovered esteem, Rousseau suggests, they began to expect it, requiring it of others in the form of civility. Breaches of civility led to horrible acts of revenge that were absent from the pure state of nature.

“[E]very voluntary wrong became an outrage, because along with the harm that resulted from the injury, the offended party saw in it contempt for his person, which often was more insufferable than the harm itself. Hence each man punished the contempt shown him in a manner proportionate to the esteem in which he held himself; acts of revenge became terrible, and men became bloodthirsty and cruel” (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 64).

Even worse than this physical brutality, according to Rousseau, was the way in which attention to reputation forced people to seem to be other than they were. While one man might have been an excellent blacksmith, for example, whose contributions to his community were numerous and important, such contributions would not have been enough to garner him esteem. Rather than actually being truly industrious and useful to society, esteem would

require that he be thought the smartest, the most attractive, or the richest. “Being something and appearing to be something became two completely different things; and from this distinction there arose grand ostentation, deceptive cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake” (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 67).

It is this state of seeming instead of being that Rousseau recognizes among his contemporaries, attributing to it both social alienation and massive loss of virtue.

“Before art had fashioned our manners and taught our passions to speak an affected language, our mores were rustic but natural, and differences in behavior heralded, at first glance, differences of character. At base, human nature was no better, but men found their safety in the ease with which they saw through each other, and that advantage, which we no longer value, spared them many vices” (*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 4).

Teaching people to veil their true feelings and intentions and to act out all manner of pretences, the attention to reputation in such a communal context, according to Rousseau, instigates all manner of vices as people lie, cheat, and steal in the name of esteem and propriety. “Suspicious, offenses, fears, coldness, reserve, hatred, betrayal will unceasingly hide under that uniform and deceitful veil of politeness, under that much vaunted urbanity that we owe to the enlightenment of our century” (*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 5).

Perhaps worse is that, even among the best of men, virtue and talent are easily squelched by the effects of concern with reputation; while such concern fosters vice, it also discourages true virtue and innovation, as esteem is doled out not to the genuinely good and deserving, but only to those who appear to be so. “The wise man does not chase after fortune, but he is not insensitive to glory; and he sees it so ill distributed, that his virtue, which a little emulation would have enlivened and made advantageous to society, languishes and dies out in misery and oblivion” (*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 17). Similarly, gifted artists and thinkers are discouraged from developing works that are innovative and

unique, preferring to reap the praise and esteem of the masses in their lifetimes.⁵ The prodigy “will lower his genius to the level of his century, and will prefer to compose popular works which are admired during his lifetime instead of marvels which would not be admired until long after his death” (*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 13). Ultimately, according to one Rousseau scholar, virtue and talent become devoid of any meaning whatsoever: “While the gap between ‘being’ and ‘seeming’ grows, the distinction between them becomes increasingly significant because appearance—how one is regarded—becomes all that matters” (Cladis 2003, 60).

Just as insidious, Rousseau argues, is the way in which reputation-seeking alienates people from each other. “No more sincere friendships, no more real esteem, no more well-founded confidence” (*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 4). Unable to trust others and equally unable to tell the truth themselves, people’s relationships are reduced to mere performances of socially prescribed scripts.

“One no longer dares to seem what one really is; and in this perpetual constraint, the men who make up this herd we call society will, if placed in the same circumstances, do all the same things unless stronger motives deter them. Thus no one will ever really know those with whom he is dealing” (*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 4).

Under these conditions, no one can ever know who his true friends are, Rousseau points out, until the decisive moment when his friends are most needed; if at that point they are revealed to be insincere, it is too late, for the damage is already done. Timothy O’Hagan captures this sense of alienation well: “Individuals have lost all autonomy and self-reliance, but have

⁵Given Rousseau’s emphasis on conformity in many of his writings, the concern that he professes about the lack of innovation inspired by attention to reputation might seem puzzling. However, considering Rousseau’s scholarly audience for his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, it makes sense that he would use this point to strengthen his overall argument; it is a point that his audience would certainly find both troublesome and convincing.

gained no social integration in return. Instead they live hollow lives of hypocrisy, deception and dependence on the unstable opinions of other equally worthless individuals” (1999, 16).

Loss of Moral Autonomy

In this context of seeming instead of being, individuals rely not upon true virtue in deciding how to act, but rather upon the way in which they appear to those around them; here, as Cladis already noted, the mere appearance of virtue becomes all that matters. Under these circumstances, “the concern for reputation is a predominantly destructive force whether as the fear of embarrassment or as the desire for distinction. The fear of embarrassment figures repeatedly in the *Confessions* as the cause of immoral behavior” (Grant 1997, 153). Ruth Grant (1997) points out that the incident of the stolen ribbon is one such example of the way in which attention to reputation can easily lead to immorality. Having stolen a ribbon belonging to his employer, Rousseau blamed the theft on an innocent servant girl, whose own reputation was subsequently ruined. In this case, his boldfaced lie was not an effort to escape reproach, but rather to avoid doing harm to his reputation. “I was not much afraid of punishment,” Rousseau admits, “I was only afraid of disgrace. But that I feared more than death, more than crime, more than anything in the world” (*The Confessions*, 88). While true virtue certainly would have dictated that Rousseau ought to tell the truth about his misdeed, the mere appearance of virtue mattered more to him. Even worse, the step taken to achieve this appearance, lying about the innocence of a moral other, only distanced Rousseau further from genuine virtue.

La Nouvelle Héloïse provides another example of the way in which the opinions of people who are less moral can supersede virtuous behavior. While exiled by his lover Julie to Paris, Saint-Preux commits a grievous error. Accepting a dinner invitation from his new

Parisian friends, Saint-Preux finds himself not at the home of a celebrated Colonel, as his friends had promised, but rather in a house of prostitution. Fearing their scoffs should he be so proper as to take his leave, he stays for dinner, believing he can eat innocently and leave politely afterwards. When they give him wine instead of water, however, his drunkenness renders him susceptible to seduction by one of the prostitutes. Saint-Preux, unlike Rousseau, does confess his mistake to Julie, who forgives him. She chastises him, however: “That which first introduces vice into an innocent soul, stifles the voice of conscience by public clamor, and represses the resolution to do good by the fear of censure” (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*, 222). It is his fear of losing face amongst his new friends—his fear of harming his reputation—that makes him stay where he knows he should not. He knew that it was right to leave, Julie insists, but it was the attention to his reputation in this particularly corrupt context that led him to immoral acts.

Loss of Personal Autonomy

In *Émile*, Rousseau’s claim that personal autonomy is lost at the hands of reputation-seeking in corrupt contexts is most evident; Émile is, after all, educated to be the perfect example of independence. Attempting to form a utopian vision of education, Rousseau’s *Émile* carefully outlines the steps required to raise a child from infancy to an eventual full adulthood that takes complete advantage of all natural strengths, talents, and abilities. One central theme in Émile’s education echoes the lesson learned already: caring about and following public opinion is certainly not the road to virtue. Rousseau’s tutor is careful to raise Émile to be both morally and intellectually autonomous, practically oblivious to what others think of him, completely unconcerned with his own reputation. In fact, Rousseau writes, Émile “is never more at ease than when no one is paying attention to him” (246).

“If he keeps in the background, it is not through embarrassment, but because in order to see well, he must not be seen; for he is hardly disturbed by what people think of him, and ridicule does not cause him the least fear. It is on this account that, always being calm and cool, he is not troubled by bashfulness. Whether he is observed or not, whatever he does is always the very best he can do; and being wholly free to observe others, he catches their manners with an ease that is not possible to the slaves of opinion” (246).

It is clear, here, that Émile is at a distinct advantage through his lack of fear of the assessments of others. While both Saint-Preux and Rousseau himself were led into serious moral error by fear of ridicule and the desire to maintain appearances, Émile escapes such a fate, for “whatever he does is always the very best he can do,” regardless of what others think (246).

Still, Rousseau acknowledges, Émile does want to impress others in some respects. “Although the desire to please does not leave him absolutely indifferent to the opinion of others, he will accept only so much of that opinion as relates directly to his own person, without caring for those arbitrary appreciations which have no law save fashion or prejudice” (247-248). Thus, Rousseau argues, Émile takes pride in being the fastest runner or the strongest wrestler, both feats able to be judged relatively objectively, “but he will care little for advantages which are not clear in themselves, but which need to be established by the judgment of others,” such as being smarter, being better educated or, even worse, “being better born” or “more highly esteemed” (248).

In fact, Rousseau suggests that the desire for such forms of esteem is one that causes men to make all kinds of erroneous judgments and foolish choices that lead not only to their moral downfalls, but also to very real personal and physical dependence upon others. People choose their careers based not on their talents or on the career’s use, but upon what might best build their reputations. “Each one is drawn,” he explains, “to the trade which he sees

practiced, when he believes it to be held in esteem” (181). Such choices are so imprudent because the objects of esteem are all wrong, Rousseau insists. The occupation whose “use is the most general and the most indispensable is incontestably the one which deserves the most esteem” (167). So while society might most honor artisans and scholars, Rousseau thinks that farmers, blacksmiths, and carpenters deserve this esteem more because of their necessity. Though choosing manual labor for his livelihood might not carry as much social approval or esteem as engagement in artistic pursuits or philosophy, Rousseau argues, Émile is better served by learning agriculture, carpentry, or any number of other practical occupations. If he has these skills, he will be self-sufficient not only morally, but also physically, dependent on no one for his own subsistence.⁶ And in this way, choices autonomous of consideration of reputation yield even more freedom from public opinion. Rousseau tells the laborer: “The opinions of others do not affect you; you have no one’s favor to court, no fool to flatter, and no porter to conciliate” (179). The laborer is free, Rousseau insists, to make his own *life* choices, in addition to moral ones.

Loss of Happiness

In *The Confessions*, Rousseau gives many examples from his own life of moments of decision between happy obscurity or reputation. Framed as crossroads that force him away from a life of anonymity to the life of pursuit of reputation he eventually leads, Rousseau is either pushed or allows himself to be pulled into the latter, and it is to these crossroads that Rousseau attributes his unhappiness. If only the master of his apprenticeship had been better, he insists, his life would have been different. “Nothing suited my character better, nor was more likely to make me happy than the calm and obscure life of a good craftsman”

⁶It is difficult to resist the temptation to note how Rousseau’s own lack of such practical skills led to his oft-regretted dependence on those who would support his artistic and philosophical endeavors.

(*Confessions*, 50). But his master's harshness forced him to run away in search of something greater. Similarly, given the chance to marry a decent woman and to follow in her father's footsteps to become a small-town musician, Rousseau declines, off in search of a life of greater ambition. "Here is another moment in my life when Providence offered me exactly what I needed in order to spend my days in happiness" (*Confessions*, 142). Yet, Rousseau rejects this offer of a wife and an occupation as a musician. "There was nothing to hesitate over in such a bargain, as I should know better than anyone" (142). Manifested as either the foolish desire to chase after reputation rather than true happiness or as forced adoption of the appearance of happiness without the substance, the effects of reputation seeking mean not a life of contentment, according to Rousseau, but rather one of constant striving and pretending. "Let us not chase after a reputation that would escape us and which, in the present state of things, would never return to us what it would have cost us, even if we had all the qualifications to obtain it," Rousseau enjoins his readers. "What good is it to seek our happiness in the opinion of another if we can find it in ourselves?" (*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 21).

Rousseau's description of the dire effects of reputation is ultimately quite convincing; it may seem, given the nasty consequences of reputation-seeking that I've outlined above, that there is little, if anything, to be gained by human beings' innate attention to reputation. But, as I suggested earlier, the dangers that Rousseau attributes to the desire for reputation are, in fact, entirely dependent on social context. In the next section, I examine Rousseau's argument that, in communal contexts that are engineered correctly, reputation can work powerfully to benefit the community in ways that nothing else can; the power that the desire for reputation has to inspire negative consequences is, for Rousseau, matched by the power

that it has to inspire the virtues that he deems necessary to the creation of strong, vital political communities.

Best Among Citizens: Reputation's Democratic Possibilities

“By what means can the government get a hold on morals? I answer that it is by public opinion. If our habits in retirement are born of our own sentiments, in Society they are born of others' opinions. When we do not live in ourselves but in others, it is their judgments which guide everything. Nothing appears good or desirable to individuals which the public has not judged to be such...” (*Letter to d'Alembert*, 300).

Here, in his *Letter to d'Alembert*, Rousseau crafts his argument about the democratic and transformative potential of the desire for reputation in the correct social and political contexts. He argues passionately that bringing the theater to the republic of Geneva⁷, his beloved and, importantly, still uncorrupted homeland, is a mistake that would only lead to Geneva's eventual ruin.

While the theater may appear to be a simple and innocent form of entertainment, Rousseau argues, it is, in fact, dangerously pernicious. Plays often tend to make heroes of people who are less than virtuous, he notes. Citing several popular works of his time, Rousseau suggests that their plots only have the effect of “bestowing on clever knaves the benefits of the public esteem owed to the virtuous” (*Letter to d'Alembert*, 272). This effect on public esteem, or public opinion, is what worries Rousseau the most—wrong public opinion, he has already shown, will lead to wrong morality. “I know of only three instruments with which the morals of a people can be acted upon: the force of laws, the empire of opinion, and the appeal of pleasure,” he writes (*Letter to d'Alembert*, 266). But whereas the tutor to *Émile* was prohibited from acting upon his student using this “empire of

⁷Geneva serves, for Rousseau, as a best-case scenario. While it may be too late to return to his ideal Roman republic, he still wants to argue that there a better alternative to the corrupt commercial society he criticizes; a polity such as Geneva is this alternative.

opinion,” for fear of taking away Émile’s truly precious moral autonomy, Rousseau’s prescriptions for the government of Geneva are quite different. The theater must be prohibited from Geneva, Rousseau insists, because of its unruliness, the way in which it interferes with the government’s ability to direct public opinion as well as the way in which it directs public opinion wrongly.

The reason that concern with reputation works to encourage virtue in Geneva, despite its destructive effects elsewhere, is that the citizens of Geneva are virtuous people *overall*, possessing the strengths, talents, and, most importantly, opinions that create and maintain a strong and upright republican community. So, while reputation-seeking in a big, corrupt city such as Paris certainly results in the kind of vices that Rousseau so forcefully maligns, the same attention to reputation in a different, more virtuous setting does, he argues, lead to virtue. “Where the public values rightly and where reputations are publicly judged, concern for reputation is not necessarily corrosive” (Grant 1997, 167). Rather, it is when “esteem is measured in gold coins and the virtues themselves are sold for money” that desire for such esteem works as a corrupting influence (*Discourse on Political Economy*, 124). The objects of esteem and virtue (or lack thereof) are unavoidably linked, according to Rousseau: “It is useless to distinguish the mores of a nation from the objects of its esteem, for all these things derive from the same principle and are necessarily intermixed” (*On the Social Contract*, 219).

Thus, it is the desire to be esteemed that, under the right circumstances, can be channeled into creating virtue. On the one hand, there is quite simply “the need to deal with the reality of individuals’ need for recognition” (Ormiston 2002, 164). But as Judith Shklar argues, the opinions and assessments of others also have a constructive power that nothing

else does; given Rousseau's insistence that the desire for reputation is among the most central and ardent of human aspirations, this constructive power makes perfect sense. Judith Shklar puts this point as romantically as Rousseau himself might: "Public opinion and mores alone can touch the heart" (2001, 179). It is simply a matter of using this power in the interests of the political community rather than in the pursuit of selfish, personal interests—the challenge is to create a system in which the objects of esteem are those that are good for the community. "All want to be admired" Rousseau reminds us (*Political Fragments*, 36). "That is the secret and final goal of the actions of men. Only the means differ" (*Political Fragments*, 36). It is up to carefully orchestrated social arrangements to determine these means. In fact, the most important law in any democratic community, Rousseau writes,

"is not engraved on marble or bronze, but in the hearts of citizens. It is the true constitution of the state. Everyday it takes on new forces. When other laws grow old and die away, it revives and replaces them, preserves a people in the spirit of its institution and imperceptibly substitutes the force of habit for that of authority. I am speaking of mores, customs, and especially of opinion, a part of the law unknown to our political theorists but one on which depends the success of all the others; a part with which the great legislator secretly occupies himself, though he seems to confine himself to the particular regulations that are merely the arching of the vault, whereas mores, slower to arise, form in the end its immovable keystone" (*On the Social Contract*, 172).

It is this law that Rousseau seeks to elucidate and encourage, both in his advice to Geneva and in his advice to Poland in *The Government of Poland*. "He who would try his hand at founding a nation must learn to dominate men's opinions, and through them to govern their passions" (*The Government of Poland*, 18). The legislator must, Rousseau argues, both recognize and deploy the desire for reputation in the correct way. To do this, he suggests monuments erected to fallen soldiers who fought bravely, public festivals honoring both veterans and their families, prizes and honors showered upon those who embody

patriotic virtues, and games that reward the talents and skills required for good citizenship. “A free people’s celebrations should breathe good taste and gravity,” he instructs, “nothing unworthy of its esteem should be held up to it for admiration” (*The Government of Poland*, 16).

Topics of Conversation: The Role of Gossip

While Rousseau argues that the law governing communal customs and public life have an important place in structuring social relations in such a way that socially and politically advantageous virtues and objects are esteemed, he also suggests that there is more to harnessing the constructive power of the desire for reputation than merely composing the correct laws. Here again, Rousseau’s arguments against bringing the theater to Geneva are instructive, not just because of his concern about the way in which the theater might disorder objects of esteem, but also because of the theater’s probable ill effects on Geneva’s social structure more generally.

Equally as dangerous as its effects on the correct conferral of esteem, according to Rousseau, is the way in which the theater would likely discourage the more innocent and healthy diversions of the Genevans. In the absence of any kind of entertainment such as the theater, he notes, the citizens of Geneva must invent their own amusements; and, for Rousseau, these amusements are ones that serve to keep the citizens of Geneva virtuous. Meeting together in circles, the men play games, read, drink, smoke, and talk. The women, in their own circles, play cards, enjoy refreshments, and gossip. “Not unendowed with pleasure and gaiety, these amusements have something simple and innocent which suits republican morals; but the moment there is Drama, goodbye to the *circles*, goodbye to the societies!” Rousseau laments (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 324, emphasis in original).

Part of the reason such societies are so important, according to Rousseau, is because they keep men and women apart much of the time. While men and women would certainly attend the theater together, he notes, the social circles of which he writes are strictly divided by gender. In places unlike Geneva where such a division is not maintained and where men and women spend too much time together, men become effeminate, physically weak and intellectually soft. But in Geneva, the all-male societies encourage the kind of sturdy, vigorous men that a strong republic requires. “By themselves, the men, exempted from having to lower their ideas to the range of women to clothe reason in gallantry, can devote themselves to grave and serious discourse without fear of ridicule” (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 328). Further, without women around, Rousseau says, men can get up out of their chairs and engage themselves in the physical pursuits that keep them strong and vital (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 328-329).⁸

However, these circles are important for another reason, as well. Rousseau argues that the gossip of the women helps to keep the morality of both sexes in check. “The societies of women are blamed for one failing; they make the women scandalmongers and satirists; and, indeed, one can easily understand that the anecdotes of a little city do not escape these feminine meetings; it can also be believed that the absent husbands are hardly spared...” (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 329). Yet, according to Rousseau, this gossip and spreading of rumors that takes place within women’s circles is not so much a failing as it is a vital service to the republic. “No matter what people have said to me about them,” Rousseau confesses,

“I have never seen any of these societies without a secret sentiment of esteem and respect for those who compose them...I do not know what they

⁸Please see the next chapter for a thorough discussion of the relationship between men and women in Rousseau’s political vision.

said but they lived together; they may have spoken of men but they did without them; and, although they criticized the conduct of others so severely, at least their own was irreproachable” (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 329-330).

There is more to Rousseau’s praise for women’s circles, however, than just the assertion that they keep women from gossiping with and therefore feminizing men. Serving as a form of the public accusation in Rome that Rousseau praises so highly, women’s gossip works for the benefit of the republic by circumscribing others’ behavior: “How many public scandals are prevented for fear of these severe observers? They almost perform the function of Censors in our City” (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 329).

Rousseau’s assertion that gossip must be preserved if Geneva is to remain virtuous is only somewhat surprising. As a long-castigated mode of communication, gossip hardly seems conducive to the kind of virtue that Rousseau seeks to cultivate.⁹ On the other hand, as I discuss in my introduction, contemporary scholars have often noted the important role that gossip plays in communal life. What is most interesting is the explicit connection Rousseau makes between forms of public accusation and the more private activity of gossip. This connection points to two important facets of gossip and reputation that are vital to thinking about both the role of reputation in contemporary political life as well as the way in which gossip works as a central constituent of the politics of reputation: the different forms of reputation that exist and the necessity of gossip in creating and maintaining certain forms of reputation.

Recalling his prescriptions for the student Émile, it is clear that Rousseau recognizes that there are different forms of reputation that must remain analytically distinct. Being the fastest runner or the strongest wrestler, according to Rousseau, were things that were both

⁹Robert Goodman (1994) points out that both Christian and Jewish religious codes denounce gossip and prescribe punishment for its practitioners.

useful and that could be judged relatively objectively, and were acceptable goals as an outlet for Émile's desire to please. Unacceptable, however, were titles that were solely based on the judgments of others or that had no clear advantages in themselves, such as being better born or more highly esteemed. As already noted, of course, the necessity of freeing Émile from the latter form of judgment stemmed from the context of corruption in which he lived. Then again, in a more virtuous place like Geneva, Rousseau's close-to-ideal polity, it is not only acceptable, but also entirely desirable that citizens strive to be the most highly esteemed. It is this striving, in fact, that shapes people into the kinds of citizens needed for a strong community and virtuous politics.

There is a more practical related point that can be taken from the analytical distinctions between forms of reputation that Rousseau's prescriptions for Émile help to identify: these different forms of reputation are created, maintained, and manipulated differently, as well. While some forms of reputation might be earned and maintained through the mere performance of activities or behaviors, other forms are solely based on the judgments of other people. For example, a reputation as a strong wrestler requires winning wrestling matches and a reputation as a fast runner requires winning foot races; there is little room for alternative opinions or interpretations. Reputations for moral behavior, such as honesty or trustworthiness, on the other hand, are much less easily created; such reputations require not only honest or trustworthy behavior, but also having others recognize and judge the behavior as honest or trustworthy, agreeing with each other that those who act in this way are honest or trustworthy. Further, not everyone can watch others' moral behavior the way they can watch a wrestling match or a foot race. Reputations for virtuous behavior, in fact, rely on the assessments of others, on secondhand information from those who have witnessed

the behavior. Thus, it is this latter form of reputation, reputation that has to do moral behavior, that is in large part created and maintained—and that can be manipulated—through the talk of people about other people, or gossip.

Clearly, in their day-to-day interplay, reputations are not nearly so easily parsed as the above analysis assumes. Someone's reputation for immorality as a cheater who takes steroids, for example, certainly calls into question his reputation as the strongest wrestler. Still, there is an analytical distinction between forms of reputation in this example: he technically remains the strongest wrestler, but it is a matter of judgment to determine whether his steroid use sullies or negates his reputation as such. The reason, then, that this analytical distinction is important is that it tells us what kinds of reputations are subject to the gossip that Rousseau defends; there are certain kinds of reputation, those related to moral behavior, that are and must be subject to policing by others through gossip.

The fact that Rousseau not only admires gossip in Geneva (if somewhat sheepishly), but also actively seeks to preserve it suggests that gossip is more than simply an innocent diversion that he finds unobjectionable. Rather, Rousseau explicitly argues that gossip plays an integral role in creating the esteem-driven community that he prescribes. While the brave can easily be held up for citizens' admiration through public festivals by honoring soldiers wounded in battle, there has to be a way of ensuring bravery and other moral virtues off the battlefield, in day-to-day life. If Rousseau's assertion that the pursuit of reputation is a central motivating force for human beings is correct, then the fear of being lessened in the eyes of other people, or the fear of losing one's reputation, certainly qualifies as a powerful influence in both circumscribing some forms of behavior and encouraging others.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have used the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to explicate the early modern reputational discourse of which he was a part. Rousseau, critiquing what he views as corrupt commercial society, points out the dangers that the innate human desire for reputation can produce when this desire is deployed in the wrong contexts. Yet Rousseau insists that this drive for reputation can be harnessed to shape communities by transforming people into virtuous citizens, both through public activities that celebrate the correct objects of esteem and by the more private policing of reputation. I have argued that certain forms of reputation, reputations based upon moral behavior that is considered private in modern societies, are the ones most susceptible to such policing through gossip. Ultimately, as Rousseau's focus on keeping men and women apart suggests, it is not everyone who gossips. This is a task that Rousseau insists must be carried out by women. In the next chapter, I move to a focus on the role that women are asked to play in political life, again relying on the work of Rousseau, as well as the criticism of Mary Wollstonecraft, to investigate more closely the assumptions, requirements, and potential difficulties of this reputational discourse.

CHAPTER 2

SPECIOUS POISONS: ROUSSEAU, WOLLSTONECRAFT, AND THE GENDER OF REPUTATION

“It has long since occurred to me that advice respecting behavior, and all the various modes of preserving a good reputation, which have been so strenuously inculcated on the female world, were specious poisons, that encrusting morality eat away the substance” (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 146).

Here, Mary Wollstonecraft makes reference to a corollary of the reputational discourse advanced by Rousseau and other early modern thinkers. Viewing the drive for reputation as a force to be harnessed in the creation of virtuous citizens, Rousseau reserves an important place in his political philosophy for women and their reputations. In fact, he arguably deems women’s reputations the most important of all, central to establishing family relations, solidifying male virtue, and making political association possible. But for Wollstonecraft and other feminist thinkers, women’s place in Rousseau’s reputational politics is inherently problematic in its consequences for women and their citizenship.

In this chapter, I examine Rousseau’s argument about the place of women in political life. Using *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and the fates of their heroines Sophie and Julie, I show how his prescriptions for women are different from those he makes for men, both in their substance and in their effects on women’s lives. Next, I turn to Mary Wollstonecraft’s evaluation of Rousseau. Her arguments about the effects of women’s role within reputational discourse on the possibility for women’s citizenship provide an important critique that exposes the vulnerable position women inhabit in Rousseau’s philosophy. Finally, I argue

that Rousseau's own distinction between "seeming" and "being" is an important one that he inexplicably and inexcusably ignores in his work on women's reputations. Taken together, these critiques ultimately suggest that, while Rousseau's political vision purports to give women power, the reality is that he leaves them disenfranchised, bearing a disproportionate amount of the social burden without receiving any true citizenship in return, unable to practice moral autonomy, their reputations conspicuously vulnerable to the manipulation of others through gossip.

Outside Themselves: Rousseau's Women and Reputation

Rousseau ultimately recommends a much different role for reputation in the lives of women than he does in the lives of men. Book V of *Émile* describes Sophie, the ideal female counterpart to Rousseau's ideal man. While Émile is expected to be morally autonomous, almost never deigning to worry about what others may think of him, Sophie, on the other hand, is to "be subject to the most continual and the most severe restraint—that which is imposed by the laws of decorum" (268). Worried always about her reputation, Sophie is expected to adhere to different rules than Émile. Women, according to Rousseau, "no sooner understand what is said to them than we control them by telling them what people will think of them" (263). While he does not explicitly claim that this trait is natural in young girls, Rousseau does note that "[i]t is only at the expense of time and labor" that this same trait might be taught to young boys (264).¹⁰ At any rate, he argues, wherever it comes from, women's propensity to care acutely about public opinion is, overall, a very good thing (264).

Women are created to please men in a variety of ways, and their concern with the

¹⁰Rousseau spends a considerable amount of time in *Letter to D'Alembert* (311-317) examining whether or not women's attention to reputation is a natural feature, without reaching any firm conclusion. He seems to believe that it is, but in the end recognizes the near impossibility of proving it. For an excellent reconstruction of this argument, see O'Hagan 1999 (190-191). For my purposes, as well as for Rousseau's, it is ultimately of little consequence whether this tendency is a natural one in women; it is there, or at least easy to foster, Rousseau argues, and its ends are good ones.

assessments of others is instrumental in making sure that they do (260). So while women “never cease to be subject either to a man or the judgments of men,” they also never stop caring about such judgments (270). Thus, they will always be pleasing, trying to conform to standards that will ensure favorable judgments from all.

However, feminist interpreters of Rousseau have argued that beyond simply making them pleasing to men, women’s concern with their reputations is a necessary feature of his political philosophy. Women’s good reputations, in fact, are the only thing that make family possible, and family is an essential element in achieving Rousseau’s political vision. In Rousseau’s imagined reconstruction of the natural human state, people lived much like solitary animals, encountering one another on occasion, but not forming packs, herds, or even families. In fact, sexual relations between men and women were brief and sporadic; women were left to raise the young on their own. Given this focus on solitary independence, a woman would only consent to raise young in such a state of nature at first because of her own physical need to nurse her children, and then, Rousseau explains, “with habit having endeared them to her, she later nourished them for their own need” (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 48). As time went on, he argues, and as human beings began to use tools and create huts, they also began to learn the advantages of banding together to divide labor, settling down into family units of man, woman, and children. In this way, according to Rousseau, “Women became more sedentary and grew accustomed to watch over the hut and the children, while the man went to seek their common subsistence” (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 63). Thus, women’s dependence on men for the survival of themselves and their children was born.

But while women had already been habituated to care for their offspring, their attachment to their children “merely instinctive, since it is presumed to occur when human beings lived exactly like animals,” men had no such attachment (Lange 2002, 30). Inspiring men to care for their children in this way, “is said [by Rousseau] to be a significant development, the result of socialization, and based on a rather abstract knowledge” (Lange 2002, 30). This abstract knowledge is, of course, the paternity of a man’s children—and, ultimately, “fathers must think that their children are their own” (Marso 1999, 36). It is quite a leap for the man (who is by nature wholly independent and autonomous) to consent to care for others, especially others to whom he may or may not have any natural link. As a consequence of such unacceptable uncertainty coupled with a natural male aversion to caring for others, it is the woman’s job to provide the assurance that the children she bears are, in fact, his. She does this by maintaining her spotless reputation:

“On account of the artificiality and apparent fragility of the bond of the father to his children, the woman is required to live a life dictated by the necessity to appear respectable, that is, to convince her husband and everyone else that she is sexually monogamous. Nothing less than this degree of certitude, bolstered by public opinion, is thought to be sufficient to induce him to remain attached to that particular family and provide for its support” (Lange 2002, 30).

In this way, then, it is only women’s careful attention to public opinion that preserves the family unit. And this is why a woman, Rousseau argues,

“subject to the judgment of men, ought to merit their esteem; she ought, above all, to secure the esteem of her husband; she ought not only to make him love her person, but make him approve her conduct; she ought to justify before the public the choice which he has made, and make her husband honored with the honor which is paid his wife” (*Émile*, 280).

Thus, woman’s reputation is necessary to create and maintain the patriarchal family, which is in turn necessary to create and maintain government. Penny Weiss and Anne Harper (2002) argue that there are two main reasons why family is required for Rousseau’s

political philosophy. First, they suggest that family is the training ground for the cooperation and obligation that is required in Rousseau's ideal government. As naturally solitary creatures, men must be taught through social institutions how to work with and care about others. This is a lesson "more easily learned on the 'micro' level of the family—where habit breeds affection, and others are known well—and then extended to larger groups" (Weiss and Harper 2002, 58). In fact, it is the family, Rousseau argues, that causes "the first developments of the heart" in creatures previously lacking such emotion (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 62). "Each family became a little society all the better united because mutual attachment and liberty were its only bonds," he points out (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 63). Secondly, and more pragmatically, the sacrifice of autonomy that the state requires is made only because the state, in turn, protects the family, both physically and as an institution. Thus, love for the family is able to "move people beyond the self," inspiring the cooperation and sacrifice political life requires (Weiss and Harper 2002, 58). It is, Rousseau insists, "through the little community, which is the family, that the heart becomes attached to the great" and it is, he points out, "the good son, the good husband, and the good father, who makes the good citizen" (*Émile*, 261).

But in addition to the role women's attention to reputation has in securing the creation and maintenance of the family, Rousseau also argues that women's modesty and chasteness plays an important role in sustaining virtue among men. "Do you want to know men?" he asks: "Study women" (*Letter to d'Alembert*, 311). The virtues that men either have or lack, Rousseau posits, are in direct proportion to the chasteness, modesty, and other virtues belonging to women. "In every station, every country, every class, the two Sexes have so strong and natural a relation to one another that the morals of the one always determine those

of the other” (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 311). As the caregivers of children and as the guardians of the home, women are charged with setting the moral tone for the family, teaching virtue to their children, and encouraging moral behavior in their husbands. This role requires, of course, that women generally behave, or at least appear to behave, virtuously themselves.

“Is there a sight in the world so touching, so respectable, as that of a Mother surrounded by her children, directing the work of her domestics, procuring a happy life for her husband and prudently governing the home? It is here that she shows herself in all the dignity of a decent woman; it is here that she really commands respect, and beauty shares with honor the homages rendered to virtue” (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 315).

Yet, beyond the direct effects of women’s virtue as an influence on their husbands and children, their chasteness and modesty, and attention to sexual reputation in particular, play a pivotal role here, as well; this is a role Rousseau hints at above when he suggests that women’s virtue commands respect. “Rousseau repeatedly observes (worries?) that women rule but that they must disguise this power and create the illusion of their dependence upon men” (Matthes 2000, 123). The appearance of chasteness and modesty in women, Rousseau insists, provides them with a potent ability to excite men’s desires. “The desires, veiled by shame, become only the more seductive; in hindering them, chasteness inflames them...It is chasteness which lends value to favors granted and sweetness to rejection” (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 313). This capacity to excite men’s desires ultimately gives women power over men, and along with it the ability to elicit men’s virtue, requiring that men be strong and vigorous before women will, as Rousseau puts it, use the excuse of their weakness to “succumb” (*Letter to d’Alembert*, 314).

Thus, Rousseau’s insistence that women must live with a constant attention to their sexual reputations in particular plays multiple roles in his political vision. First, women’s good sexual reputations provide men with assurance of paternity, allowing the family and, by

extension, government to come into existence. Second, women's virtue allows them to structure their family relations in such a way as to pass their virtue on to their children and husbands. Finally, the appearance of chastity and modesty that come with a blameless sexual reputation give women the power to excite men's desires and, once armed with this power, to inspire virtue among men. This is where Rousseau's earlier arguments about the importance of women's gossip become important—women are charged with both the ability and the task of policing moral behavior, including the sexual reputations of others, and one way they do this is through gossip. In this way, then, according to Rousseau, women's civic contribution comes not from participation as citizens, but rather from their more private role in both creating the family and in making men into virtuous citizens. As noted in the first chapter, it is important to Rousseau that men and women largely occupy different spheres; in addition to heightening women's ability to excite men, such a separation ensures that men will not suffer the feminizing—and, according to him, consequently civically eviscerating—effects of spending too much time with women. In a very real sense, Rousseau's vision in this way dictates that men can be the kind of citizens needed for a virtuous political community only because women are not.

Running the Same Course: The Fates of Julie and Sophie

Charged with the weighty burden that Rousseau demands of all women, his two heroines Julie and Sophie perform quite differently. While Julie is at first prey to missteps, her adherence to Rousseau's prescriptions ultimately provides the basis for the creation of a family and community that is a metaphor for Rousseau's ideal political community. Sophie, on the other hand, begins virtuously as the picture of Rousseau's ideal woman, but eventually falters, precipitating the end of her own little family, as well as the end of Émile's

citizenship. The similar fate of each of these heroines, despite their very different stories, is instructive, providing a provocative look at the effects of the role Rousseau prescribes for women, both for the political communities he champions, as well as for the women themselves.

Julie and Clarens

Centering on a love affair between a tutor, Saint-Preux, and his student, Julie, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is the tale of Julie's fall from innocence into an illicit affair with Saint-Preux and the reclamation of her seemingly lost virtue with the help of her husband, Wolmar. At the beginning of the novel, the unmarried Julie's innocence and virtue are perfect and her reputation impeccable. Saint-Preux confesses his love to her and when she can no longer conceal her reciprocal feelings for him, she fears she is ruined: "The secret is out, and my honor also is lost...is there a death more cruel than to survive one's honor?" (32). A philosopher and a virtuous man in his own right, Saint-Preux vacillates between agreeing with Julie's assessment of their relationship as corrupt and immoral and arguing that there is a higher law of virtue than the conventions and opinions of others.

"In what people call honor, I distinguish between that which is founded on public opinion and that which is derived from self-esteem. The first consists in vain prejudices no more stable than a ruffled wave, but the second has its basis in the eternal truths of morality. The honor of public opinion can be advantageous with regard to fortune, but it does not reach the soul and thus has no influence on real happiness. True honor, on the contrary, is the essence of happiness, because it alone inspires that permanent feeling of interior satisfaction which constitutes the happiness of a rational being" (67).

Here, Saint-Preux defines two different types of honor. The former, "founded on public opinion," might rightly be considered "reputation" in the sense of what is believed by others about a person's character (67). This is the type of honor that Saint-Preux rejects as "vain

prejudice” with no real bearing on true morality or happiness (67). Given Rousseau’s arguments about the role of reputation in corrupt societies, Saint-Preux’s indictment of reputation makes sense—he and Julie, it is clear, do not live in Rousseau’s ideal political community. The second form of honor, on the other hand, is based on something else, adherence to an abstract and timeless moral code to which one’s actions can only be compared given a knowledge of one’s true feelings. The depth and truth of the love between Julie and Saint-Preux is the rightful measure of its virtue, not human rules and opinions. Who, then, could possibly deem the love between Julie and Saint-Preux unscrupulous? Battling her self-hatred at having succumbed to him, Saint-Preux asks Julie this very question: “Have you not obeyed the purest laws of nature? Have you not freely entered into the holiest of engagements? What have you done that both divine and human laws can and must not authorize?” (82).

Over and over again, the love between Julie and Saint-Preux is tested and stifled by her constant concern with her reputation, as well as his ambivalence about it. While his assertions that their love is truly honorable in his sense of the term resurface at times, he is torn and, in his love for her, fears for her reputation, for her “honor of public opinion” (67). When a planned tryst between the two is foiled, Julie comforts Saint-Preux by identifying the difficulties they might have faced. “[P]eople would have known that we were both in the country. In spite of our precautions, perhaps they might have known that we were there together. At least they would have suspected that we were, and that is enough” (103). It is better that they did not meet, she insists, for it certainly would have had ill effects on her reputation.

When Lord Bomston, a visitor to town, becomes smitten with Julie and, frustrated by her lack of attentions, unwittingly comments to Saint-Preux that she is cold, her lover leaps to her defense, challenging Bomston to a duel. Fearing both the possible revelatory effects of Saint-Preux's indignation as well as his imminent injury or death, Julie intervenes, confessing their love to Bomston and begging him both to keep their secret and call off the duel. The kindly Bomston does as she wishes, retreating from the duel and publicly apologizing to Saint-Preux, effectively sacrificing his own reputation for those of Julie and Saint-Preux. Here, Bomston reprises Saint-Preux's earlier argument, suggesting that the love between the two is, indeed, honorable and virtuous, despite the fact that public opinion would charge otherwise.

“Your two souls are so extraordinary that they cannot be judged by common rules. For you, happiness neither is to be attained by the same manner nor is it of the same kind as that of other men; they seek only power and the attention of others, but you need only tenderness and peace. Joined to your love is an emulation of virtue which elevates you, and you would both be less worthy if you were not in love” (135).

Again Rousseau suggests, this time through Bomston, that public opinion is neither the arbiter of virtue nor the path to happiness; rather, their love, internal and hidden from public sight, makes their actions virtuous in spite of their opposition with conventions of morality. In fact, Bomston goes a step further, positing “the attention of others” at odds with “tenderness and peace.”

Eventually, Julie's devoted cousin and confidante Claire warns Julie that “[t]he affair between Lord Bomston and your friend has created all the talk in the town that one might expect. People suspect, they make conjectures, and you are named” (140). She urges Julie, “send your friend away, or you are undone” (141). Julie finally acquiesces, and Saint-Preux is sent away, distraught. Claire praises Julie, saying “you are again in the midst of your

family and your people, cherished, honored, enjoying a spotless reputation and universal esteem” (148). Claire knows that, for Julie, recovery of this reputation and esteem constitutes the highest and most important good.

Yet, the voice of Bomston continues to try to convince Julie to forsake her reputation for her love. He offers Julie part of his fortune and one of his homes abroad if she will elope with Saint-Preux, advising her to consider his offer carefully and to “be fearful of the error of prejudice and the seduction of scruples which often lead to vice along the road of honor” (168). Here again, he suggests that conventional virtue as dictated by the opinions of others may not be genuine. If she refuses, he warns, “Public approval will incessantly be contradicted by the cry of your conscience. You will be respected but contemptible. It is preferable to be forgotten but virtuous” (168). Still, Julie grapples with the competing demands of public opinion, her conscience, and her love for both Saint-Preux and her family. She ultimately rejects Bomston’s offer, citing her family’s likely emotional harm—not to mention the potential harm to their reputations—as reasons to refuse elopement.

Eventually, Julie’s father learns of her relationship with Saint-Preux. Himself a slave to public opinion and social conventions, he refuses to authorize the marriage of his daughter, a noblewoman, to the commoner Saint-Preux, despite the fact that it is made clear by Bomston to both Julie and her father that this would be the right thing to do regardless of public opinion. Bomston appeals to Julie, counseling “that listening to her father would not be obeying the higher dictates of Nature as embodied in duty, but rather would be merely caving in to the demands of public behavior” (Morgenstern 2002, 120). Still, Julie’s father promises his daughter in marriage to an old friend and fellow noble, Monsieur de Wolmar, and Julie resigns herself to her father’s authority and thus to the marriage, while Saint-Preux

escapes his misery by accepting a commission on a ship about to set out on a long sea voyage.

Several years later, Saint-Preux's return to Europe finds Julie living in evident happiness on the large estate of Clarens with her new husband Wolmar and their two children. Julie has confessed her love affair with Saint-Preux to Wolmar, who admitted that he knew about it all along. Seeking to "cure" both Julie and Saint-Preux of any lingering romantic feelings, and thus of any final remnants of their previous immorality, Wolmar invites his wife's former lover to come stay with them at Clarens. Saint-Preux accepts the invitation, and he and Julie are soon reunited. While both have some fears of relapse, Wolmar insists that they are virtuous enough to avoid it if they will only follow one simple rule. "A single moral precept can take the place of all the others. It is this one: never do or say anything you do not want the whole world to see and hear" (291). Appealing here to the concern with reputation, Wolmar's vision clearly contradicts that presented by Rousseau up to this point. The heroes of the novel, both Saint-Preux and Bomston, have maintained that virtue is not necessarily found in the opinions of others; one might do or say something that will bring chastisement by others but that is, regardless, genuinely moral. What Wolmar suggests is that the easiest and most simple way to be virtuous is to always be mindful of what others would think—if others find behavior virtuous, then it most certainly is. This shift is completely in keeping with Rousseau's earlier arguments about the role of reputation in political life. In Clarens, the distinction between "seeming" and "being" is dissolved; each person is to "be" as though he were actually appearing to others. As a metaphor for his ideal political community, then, Clarens is a place that is virtuous overall, the kind of place where esteem is given to the virtuous and where the desire for reputation is no longer dangerous.

Julie accepts Wolmar's argument, and it is in large part her virtue that allows Clarens to become the place it is. Still, her own discussions with the widowed Claire continue to echo Rousseau's assertions about the place of reputation-seeking in corrupt contexts. Believing in error that Claire has fallen in love with Saint-Preux, Julie encourages their union, repeating to Claire the argument that was made in vain to Julie herself by both Saint-Preux and Bomston before her marriage to Wolmar. While less truly virtuous women may have nothing but public opinion to guide their morality, Julie tells Claire, "you, virtuous and Christian woman, you who see your duty and respect it, you who know and follow rules other than public opinion, your foremost honor is that which your conscience gives you, and it is that which it is important to preserve" (376). Thus, Julie tells Claire, the path to true virtue lies not in what others think of her—she should not worry what the world might think should she confess her love to Saint-Preux—but in honoring the dictates of her own feelings and conscience. Still living in the wider, corrupt world, Claire must resist its dictates and rely instead on her own inner moral sense.

Within Clarens, however, Julie and Saint-Preux abide by Wolmar's transparency principle and get along well, for the most part, with few if any palpable lapses into their old feelings for one another. It appears to all that they have been redeemed, changed for the better within the walls of Clarens and restored to virtue. Even Bomston benefits from the counsel of the inhabitants of Clarens. Telling Wolmar about Bomston's impending marriage to a reformed prostitute who seeks to leave her immoral life, Saint-Preux laments, "I tremble to think that his fearless love of virtue, which makes him scorn public opinion, may carry him to the other extremity and make him defy even the sacred laws of decency and honor" (371). Here again, public opinion and virtue are posited at odds, at least for Bomston, if no

longer for Saint-Preux, who formerly made a veritable career of denying the sacredness of such publicly adjudicated laws. Wolmar and Saint-Preux conspire together, successfully as it turns out, to save Bomston from his imminent ruin. Bomston thanks Wolmar for this intervention, explaining his foolish behavior: “I was ashamed to sacrifice the esteem which I owed her merit to the public opinion which I scorned...thinking more of my happiness than my reputation...” (387).

This saga of Rousseau’s heroine Julie is one that tells several stories. First, Rousseau’s indictment of a social system that forbids the marriage of the noble Julie and the commoner Saint-Preux is evident in the retelling of their love affair. Through the characters of Saint-Preux and Bomston, Rousseau reprises his arguments about the pursuit of reputation in contexts in which esteem is doled out incorrectly. The incommensurate social and material positions that doom the relationship between Julie and Saint-Preux are based not upon the things that really matter, such as virtue or true talent, but rather upon the meaningless prejudices of a corrupt society that prizes money over either of these goods.¹¹ Here, Saint-Preux makes a point worthy of Émile’s tutor: virtue comes not from seeking a good reputation that is based upon these prejudices, but rather from conforming to a more timeless notion of virtue, no matter what others might think. Saint-Preux and Bomston’s insistence that the love between Saint-Preux and Julie is not in itself lacking in virtue, the tragedy that the two lovers must remain apart, and Julie’s admonitions to Claire to resist the dictates of public opinion thus mirror Rousseau’s own arguments about the moral bankruptcy of such opinion in corrupt societies.

¹¹Social rank of this variety, as one might guess, is something that Rousseau despises. He disdains in *The Confessions* those whose heads “are full of prerogatives of rank and nobility,” when such prerogatives are, he suggests, so incommensurate with true worth and virtue (305). Of course, Rousseau never hesitates to mention when those of high rank compliment him or treat him with respect!

Second, despite this argument, the consummation of Julie's relationship with Saint-Preux is presented as her fall from virtue. Regardless of Rousseau's stance on the distorted views of their society, Julie is still expected to conform to the demands of female modesty and chastity. Even though Saint-Preux ought not to obey the dictates of public opinion, trusting his own moral compass instead, Julie must remain concerned with her sexual reputation. Female attention to *this* form of public opinion, even in corrupt contexts, it is clear, is not subject to the same constraints as general reputation-seeking for men. This point is belabored even further in Wolmar and Saint-Preux's alarm about Bomston's impending marriage to the reformed prostitute. It is not merely the social context that forbids the marriage, but also the more hard and fast rules prescribed by Rousseau regarding women's sexual reputations. Wolmar is free to marry Julie, despite her fall from virtue, thanks to both her unsullied reputation and, no doubt, the miscarriage of the pregnancy that resulted from her tryst with Saint-Preux. Bomston's marriage to a woman whose reputation is irreparable, on the other hand, threatens the very fabric that makes family and political communities possible.

The establishment of Clarens and the redemption of Julie's virtue is the third story *La Nouvelle Héloïse* tells. As a metaphor for the kind of political society Rousseau seeks to create, Clarens is a place in which virtue reigns, a place where attention to reputation yields not corruption and danger, but rather true morality. Yet, as Melissa Matthes (2000) points out, within the arc of Rousseau's story it is only Julie's fall and her redemption that make Clarens possible; as Rousseau's version of the rape of Lucretia, Julie's story is the basis of the founding of Clarens. Her fall from grace positions her as Wolmar's student as she learns from him how to be truly virtuous. In a very real sense, then, Clarens is both the classroom

in which Julie is taught and the experiment through which she practices.¹² It is centered around and predicated upon her virtue. Like all women, Julie must retain the appearance of virtue to ensure virtue in those around her.¹³ Wolmar, Saint-Preux, and the other inhabitants of Clarens rely on Julie's virtue to make Clarens virtuous, just as Rousseau's larger political vision relies on the appearance of all women's virtue.

Finally, the end of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and Julie's end as well, tell another, more striking story. Before tragedy befalls her, Julie admits that, contrary to all appearances, she is not sincerely happy in her life with Wolmar and their children in Clarens. When she rescues her son from drowning, Julie becomes gravely ill. Following her death, which some commentators have called either self-willed or an outright suicide, her revelation to Saint-Preux, left behind as a letter, is opened. In the letter, Julie admits "You had thought me cured of my love for you, and I thought I was too" (405). But Julie was never, as Wolmar and the other inhabitants of Clarens believed, free from her feelings for Saint-Preux. She had to die, or else risk straying from the virtue that sustained her community. "I dare pride myself in the past, but who might have been able to answer for my future? One day more, perhaps, and I might be guilty!" (405). Death was ultimately Julie's only freedom from temptation and unhappiness; her own potential moral downfall had she lived would have been Clarens' downfall, as well.

Sophie in Paris

While Sophie and Émile are united in familial perfection at the end of Rousseau's treatise on education, they do not live happily ever after, as their fairy tale union might

¹²One might imagine that neither would be necessary were it not for Julie's original lapse in virtue.

¹³Certainly, Rousseau would hope that the appearance of virtue would be a manifestation of the reality of virtue. As Wollstonecraft will argue, however, this may not necessarily be the case.

suggest. In *Les Solitaires*, the unfinished sequel to *Émile*, Rousseau continues his story of the couple, detailing the events that in the years following their marriage. After the death of both of Sophie's beloved parents, as well as their daughter, Émile takes Sophie and their son to Paris, hoping to distract her from her sorrow. Corrupted there, despite their exceptional virtue, the marriage between Émile and Sophie dissolves. Enthralled by the many amusements of the city, Émile becomes restless, gadding about from diversion to diversion, all but forgetting about Sophie. His love wavers and, at a loss, Sophie commits adultery and becomes pregnant, voluntarily confessing her mistake to Émile. Convinced that her virtue and reputation are irredeemable and that her own poor reputation will sully his own, Émile leaves her, along with society, truly becoming the autonomous and independent man he was educated to be. Left alone pregnant and with their son, Sophie is defeated. Her situation is an impossible one—no means of support, a poor reputation, and yet a truly virtuous soul. Sophie is horrified at her own behavior, recognizing the gravity of her mistake. Still, like Julie, “[s]he has no alternative but to die, which she obligingly does, charming to the end” (Okin 2002, 93).

Émile and Sophie's sad ending also tells several extraordinarily instructive stories. First, the dissolution of their family points to what ought to be an obvious upshot of Rousseau's argument about sexual reputation: if sexual reputation provides the primary mechanism for maintaining the family, then the loss of sexual reputation is certain to destroy the family—just as Julie's loss of virtue would have destroyed Clarens. Despite his best efforts, Émile is unable to invent any reason to stay with Sophie now that her virtue has been compromised and her reputation lost, ultimately deciding that she can never again be trustworthy. “She has nothing now to preserve; neither love, nor virtue, nor esteem; nothing

to lose by offending me, not even the regret that accompanies a first offense” (*Les Solitaires*, 41). Second, if the family provides the training ground for citizens, then the loss of sexual reputation, in destroying the family, also destroys citizens. This is quite clearly the case for Émile, who retreats from social and political life completely upon what is essentially the voluntary desertion of his wife and child. And Émile himself acknowledges this, admitting “I ceased to be a citizen” (*Les Solitaires*, 58). Rousseau’s finest student is left to wander the earth aimlessly, without attachment to family or country. Finally, the misery that accompanies the loss of sexual reputation and the dissolution of Émile and Sophie’s family is felt by both of them. Sophie, like Julie, is forced to die, and Émile is left alone and unhappy, his love for Sophie allegedly remaining, but with only the bittersweet memories of his once happy life.

Though their paths were clearly very different, Julie and Sophie’s ends remained the same. Julie’s love for Saint-Preux, coupled with the necessity of her virtue for the survival of her community, meant that death was her only option. Sophie’s transgression spelled the end of her family, the end of Émile’s citizenship, and the end of her own life. In both cases, the requisite appearance of female sexual virtue is highlighted and it is clear that, for Rousseau, families and communities cannot survive without it. What remains less clear, given Julie and Sophie’s fates, is whether women can possibly survive with it.

Preserving a Good Reputation: Wollstonecraft’s Critique of Rousseau

Feminist critics have argued that one main difficulty with women’s dependence on the opinions of others, of course, is that women subsequently lack the degree of moral autonomy to which men should aspire, setting them up to fall prey to all of the dangers of reputation that such dependence on it in corrupt contexts can cultivate. The corrupting

influence of Paris is clearly partly at fault, for example, for Sophie's infidelity. But, as Lydia Lange notes, women's concern with reputation also puts them in a particularly insecure place within Rousseau's philosophy at large. "This abandonment of moral autonomy for women is particularly damning from Rousseau, who considers such autonomy essential not only for citizenship, but even for true humanity" (Lange 2002, 31). Yet Rousseau's insistence that women always adhere to public opinion can indeed be overstated. Resonating with his earlier arguments about the dangers of reputation is his concern that women not be taught or expected to conform to opinion absolutely: "To what condition should we reduce women if we make public prejudice the law of their conduct?" (*Émile*, 278). The "rule anterior to opinion" or, more plainly, "the inner moral sense," Rousseau is adamant, is equally important to women's moral choices:

"The moral sense, without opinion, will not give them that delicacy of soul which adorns good manners with universal honor; and opinion, without the moral sense, will never produce anything but artificial and immodest women, who substitute appearance in the place of virtue" (*Émile*, 279).

The problem, then, is to ensure that women conform to the demands of an often corrupt public opinion without sacrificing virtue. "When she depends at once on her own conscience and the opinions of others, she must learn to compare these two rules, to reconcile them, and to prefer the first only when they are in opposition" (*Émile*, 280). Thus, Sophie, too, must be taught to reason, if differently than *Émile*: "Émile learns about 'things'; Sophie must learn about people and opinions" (Parry 2001, 262). Susan Meld Shell notes that it is the particularly female method of reasoning fostered by women's education that makes such comparison between moral sense and public opinion possible. Sophie's reason, unlike that of *Émile*, requires "skill in reconciling her desires and the commands of others...skill in pleasing others without lying" and "skill in managing the proprieties without doing violence to her

conscience” (Shell 2001, 289). Sophie’s conscience, unlike Émile’s which is based in “an abstract concept of justice,” is “grounded in familial affection and gratitude” (Shell 2001, 290).

But maintaining this difficult balance between opinion and moral sense, and, indeed, even following Rousseau’s somewhat murky guidelines on the subject, does not seem as though it would prove easy. Julie’s decision to remain with her parents rather than elope with Saint-Preux may provide one example of the family-grounded moral reasoning that Shell identifies, but rather than being contrary to public opinion, this decision is one that certainly would have been endorsed by the community. Yet all attempts by Julie to reconcile her moral sense—*especially* the parts of her conscience grounded in love for her family—with both her love for Saint-Preux and the dictates of public opinion led only to her own unhappiness. In fact, Susan Moller Okin (2002) argues, it is this kind of internal division that was part of what necessitated Julie’s death; the impossibility of reconciling these two sets of moral guidelines meant that there was nothing left for Julie to do but die.

One woman who does manage to survive the treacherous landscape of Rousseau’s dictates for feminine morality, however, is Julie’s beloved cousin Claire. As Lisa Disch (1994) points out, Claire is forced to make a complicated choice between Julie’s life or reputation. During one of the many times Saint-Preux is sent away, Julie’s health suffers; she is quite simply dying of loneliness for the man she loves. In an effort to save her cousin, Claire makes the decision to ask Saint-Preux to return. “Because of the intensity of Julie’s love for Saint-Preux, it is a choice between tragedies: either Julie’s life or her reputation will be sacrificed” (Disch 1994, 29). Here, Claire knows, quite rightly it turns out, that Julie’s reputation is endangered—in fact, it is upon Saint-Preux’s return that he and Julie

consummate their relationship. Still, it is clear in this case that Claire's family-grounded moral sense is in conflict with the demands of public opinion and that her conscience ultimately triumphs. Also clear is that Claire's choice leads to no better ends than the choices made by Julie; while Claire lives, she still loses the person she loves most. She manages to remain alive, but still ends up incurably unhappy.¹⁴

As the basis of Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau, concern about the status of women's virtue given the prescriptions he makes for them looms large in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Writing what has become her most famous work largely as an explicit critical response to Rousseau's ideas about gender relations, Wollstonecraft was one of the first feminist critics of Rousseau to interrogate his dictates about female education, weakness, chasteness, and modesty.¹⁵ Admitting that women may be physically weaker than men, Wollstonecraft rejects Rousseau's insistence that such physical weakness necessitates that women be educated differently from men, in the arts of dress and coquetry. In fact, she posits, citing her own superior experience with the education of girls and young women, that Rousseau's argument that women are naturally interested in dolls and clothes is philosophically unsound; rather, Wollstonecraft argues, women have been shaped by social surroundings that leave them little else to explore. She attacks, in particular, Rousseau's

¹⁴Wolmar describes Claire's reaction upon Julie's death: "I learned that it had been necessary to carry her into her room, and even to confine her in it, for she would return each moment to Julie's, throw herself upon the body, warm it with her own, strive to revive it, importune it, press herself against it in a kind of frenzy, call it aloud a thousand passionate names, and feed her despair with all these useless efforts" (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*, 403). Upon recovering her senses, Claire herself writes to Saint-Preux, "I have only enough strength and life to feel the horrors of death" (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*, 408). She begs him to come grieve with her, "That is the only consolation which I may hope for; that is the only pleasure left for me to enjoy" (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*, 408).

¹⁵Given Wollstonecraft's unconventional life as an eighteenth-century female writer and radical, it is surprising that her own reputation was actually quite solid during her lifetime. While her work was certainly subject to criticism by conservative thinkers, it was largely well-received; *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* earned good reviews and became a bestseller at its time. Wollstonecraft enjoyed, according to one biographer, "public acclaim for her writing" and "recognition by her intellectual peers" (Goff 2004, xxiii). It wasn't really until after Wollstonecraft's death in 1797, when her husband William Godwin published a memorial that included details of her love affairs and suicide attempts, that Wollstonecraft's reputation suffered.

assertions about women's virtue, arguing that the basis of women's morality should be no different than that of men. "In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau's opinion respecting men; I extend it to women," she writes (13).

While Rousseau himself was quick to argue that men's attention to reputation in the wrong context creates a wildly incommensurate and dangerous distinction between "seeming" and "being," Wollstonecraft points out, albeit in different language, that women, forced to bow to the demands of reputation, are no less susceptible to this danger.

"Weak minds are always fond of resting in the ceremonials of duty, but morality offers much simpler motives; and it were to be wished that superficial moralists had said less respecting behavior, and outward observances, for unless virtue, of any kind, be built on knowledge, it will only produce a kind of insipid decency. Respect for the opinion of the world, has, however, been termed the principal duty of woman in the most express words..." (148).

Interested always in their reputations, Wollstonecraft thus argues, women either work to appear virtuous when they are not, or behave virtuously for all of the wrong reasons. Indeed, she points out, "I am afraid that morality is very insidiously undermined, in the female world, by the attention being turned to the show instead of the substance" (151). The gravity of Wollstonecraft's critique is borne out in Sophie's story.¹⁶ The virtue of the truthful admission Sophie makes of her infidelity is not rewarded; she loses Émile and her life. Not caught red-handed in her indiscretion, Sophie could have easily preserved her family, as well as Émile's citizenship, by simply pretending the child she carried was his, and no one would have been the wiser. The real virtue inherent in admitting her mistake, in other words, was a poor substitute for the appearance of virtue that women must maintain to sustain their

¹⁶Incidentally, Wollstonecraft's assessment of the character Sophie is that she "is undoubtedly a captivating one," though at the same time "grossly unnatural" in her overwhelming feminine charm and goodness.

families and their political communities. This is a lesson that Wollstonecraft argues is very dangerous.

More importantly, according to Wollstonecraft, there is yet another problematic consequence of the role Rousseau prescribes for women. He wants to argue that their concern with their reputations ultimately yields them a power over men that provides the basis of their civic contribution, barring them from real public participation but requiring their more private role as chaste objects of desire, capable therefore of training the virtues of men. In reality, Wollstonecraft suggests, men do not only show disrespect for women's virtuous reputations—they in fact hate them. “But, in proportion as this regard for the reputation of chastity is prized by women,” Wollstonecraft asserts, “it is despised by men” (153). She argues that the appearance of chasteness and modesty that women are forced to cultivate robs them of reason and substance, crippling their mental faculties and making them not respected and admired for their virtue, but rather objects of male contempt. Any small measure of power over men that their sexuality provides them, she insists, is purchased at the price of genuine esteem, as “virtue is sacrificed to temporary gratifications, and the respectability of life to the triumph of an hour” (35).

Ultimately, Wollstonecraft differentiates between the sexual respectability to which women are supposed to aspire and a true respectability based on intelligence, sincerity, and the exercise of reason. “To become respectable, the exercise of the understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character; I mean explicitly to say that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the *modest* slaves of opinion” (47, emphasis in original). Far from securing them power, she insists, women's role within Rousseau's vision, their eyes turned always toward the opinions of others about

themselves, makes them weak, shallow, and vapid, establishing the very grounds for their subordination to men.

Conclusion

The extraordinary power held by women's sexual reputations is dangerous not only for the women themselves, but also for men in particular and the entire political community in general. Julie and Sophie's lives are circumscribed by what others think of them, and both are ultimately lost when they are unable to live up to Rousseau's ideal. Laura, Bomston's reformed prostitute, is relegated to a life of infamy by her poor reputation, despite her true virtue. While the sequel to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* that might have told us of Laura's eventual whereabouts is unfinished, one can only imagine that her fate could not have been much better than that of Julie and Sophie. When it comes to women, Rousseau admits, "reputation is a kind of legal barrier, the removal of which leaves the person who has lost it very defenseless" (*The Amours of Lord Edward B.*, 96). Yet, despite the more severe effects suffered by Rousseau's heroines—and despite the male exemption from concern with their own sexual reputations—Rousseau's heroes are not spared its ill effects, either. Bomston loses Laura, and Émile loses Sophie and his citizenship, both because of their respective love interest's sexual reputation. Rousseau makes it very clear that while men may not have sexual reputations of their own to guard, their general reputations can easily be tarnished by attachment to women of poor repute. "It is certain," Émile reasons, "that wherever any attention is paid to the morals of the people, the wife's infidelity reflects dishonour on the husband" (*Les Solitaires*, 37).

Ultimately, Rousseau assigns sexual reputations a power greater than that of any other kind of reputation, and for women the stakes are clearly much higher. The desire for

reputation, he argues, is a driving force in the hearts of all people, and this force can be deployed to compel them to lives of talent, virtue, and good citizenship. Further, while it might certainly be painful on the individual level to lose one's reputation as a virtuous man or a good citizen, these reputations can be restored. In fact, it is in the continual striving to maintain or recreate such reputations that the desire for reputation becomes so useful to Rousseau's political vision. Women's sexual reputations, on the other hand, are irredeemable; once they are lost, they can never be regained. Because of this, and because they are the basis for their power and thus for their civic contribution, women's sexual reputations constrain them in a way that men's reputations do not. It is here that Wollstonecraft's second critique of Rousseau becomes most salient. While women's sexual reputations are supposed to put them on a separate but somewhat more powerful footing than men, the reality is, as Wollstonecraft points out, that women's true potential for citizenship and civic contributions are stunted by their constant concern with appearing respectable. The problematic difference between "seeming" and "being" that Rousseau so forcefully castigates as one of the drive for reputation's most dangerous effects becomes, in the case of his women, a twofold disaster, leaving women in a place that is ultimately quite familiar, a place of vulnerability and exclusion from public citizenship, a place in which their citizenship is constrained and determined by incommensurate rules about acceptable sexual appearance and conduct.

Rousseau's entire political vision necessitates the "seeming" of women's sexual virtue. As the basis for the family, government, and the virtue of all citizens, this appearance is vital to securing good government. This means, Rousseau tries to suggest, that women's contributions are central; while they may not achieve the formal public citizenship that men

enjoy, women's private cultivation of the appearance of sexual virtue and the power it brings with it means that they enjoy a different form of civic contribution. But far from giving women power, the focus on their sexual reputations simply means that they are subject to sexual standards that are in fact unrelated to any actual civic contributions. Even worse, women's lives are both circumscribed and threatened by the opinions of others—because, remember, the appearance of sexual virtue is the important thing—and this means that they are disproportionately subject to policing by others through such means as gossip, which Rousseau establishes as a legitimate means of regulating moral reputations in particular.

Second, and related to the first point, while Rousseau very usefully points out the distinction between “seeming” and “being,” he views this disparity as one advanced by the individual for his own gain. This is something, he suggests, that only happens in corrupt societies. But taking this distinction a step further requires recognizing that not only can reputations be mistaken, but they can also be accidentally or purposefully manipulated by others to their own advantage. Take, for example, the reputation of the poor servant girl in Rousseau's ribbon incident. Take also the very real power that Rousseau attributes to gossip. Both men and women in Rousseau's vision are in many respects and to varying extents at the whim of others, but, again, these stakes are much higher for women, who can easily be destroyed by one rumor of infidelity. Given the immense power Rousseau attributes to sexual reputation, his failure to acknowledge reputation's precarious relationship with truth in this context is particularly damaging.¹⁷ The power to destroy the family, to decimate citizens, to devastate men, and to leave women's happiness, lives, and civic contributions demolished is left to the discretion of what Rousseau himself suggests can be a capricious, corrupt, and

¹⁷While Rousseau certainly recognized the distinction between “seeming” and “being” in the context of seeming to be virtuous or worthy of esteem when one is not, he never really fully considers the opposite: the possibility of having an unearned reputation for being less than virtuous when one in fact is.

error-prone public. Taking Rousseau's discussion of reputation seriously, then, encourages a critical reconsideration of this relationship between truth and moral reputations, especially sexual reputations. What is left to consider is how this power can be and is employed and manipulated by individuals, groups, and even government.

CHAPTER 3

BOWED TO THE YOKE: HARRIET TAYLOR AND JOHN STUART MILL ON REPUTATION AND INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY

“Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they live in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes: until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own” (*On Liberty*, 129).

John Stuart Mill is famously outraged by the tyranny that public opinion can lord over all members of society, destroying individual liberty. He argues that the homogenizing effects of public opinion stifle genius, personal development, and the quest for truth. He also posits that women’s subordination is one that is based upon and legitimized by public opinion. While he is most well-known for this language of “public opinion,” however, I argue that Mill’s understanding of the way in which public opinion works is undergirded by a set of assumptions about reputation; much of the power of public opinion comes from the individual’s concern with what others will think of him, and much of the damage of public opinion comes from its ability to eviscerate the individual liberty that Mill so prizes. For John Stuart Mill, the desire for reputation is at once universal and at the same time an effect of the enervating effects of civilization. It is cowardly and simultaneously perfectly understandable. It must be avoided as a real means of socially sanctioning individuals, but it may also be used to discourage acts that are inappropriate or foolhardy.

In this chapter, I investigate John Stuart Mill's arguments about the effects of public opinion. I suggest that while his critique of the desire for reputation may appear to be somewhat conflicted, Mill's account is actually one that is nuanced in a way that is quite helpful in thinking about reputation's effects. I also engage his work on women's subordination to think further about how public opinion and the desire for reputation work as an agent of women's oppression. Finally, I end with a critical discussion of what we might learn about reputation from both Mill's useful observations as well as his oversights. Up until now, I've been referring to this as a chapter about the work of John Stuart Mill. I want to argue, however, that this is not strictly the case. I begin, then, with a discussion of the collaboration between Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill, a collaboration that speaks not only to their work as individual thinkers and to the nebulous border between them, but also to the way in which their own personal experiences with living experimentally and speaking out against public opinion influenced their own reputations.

“A Double Star”: Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill

It is nearly impossible to write successfully about John Stuart Mill without acknowledging his partnership with Harriet Taylor, though many commentators have tried. Neglecting their relationship is especially difficult in a piece about reputation and gossip; in fact, one of the many reasons that the Mills' work is so useful in thinking about these issues is that their unconventional association made withstanding gossip and protecting their reputations a central concern for both Mills (Jacobs 1998a, Zerilli 1992). Further, their personal reputations continue to be negotiated and contested in contemporary criticism of their work, in which commentators have speculated on the true nature of their collaborative relationship. As one might guess, Harriet Taylor Mill bears the brunt of this scrutiny;

indeed, John Stuart Mill's reputation is often salvaged at the price of hers. I begin this chapter, then, with a brief history of the Mills' personal and intellectual association, a discussion of the controversy that continues to surround it, and an examination of the role of gossip and reputation in the lives of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill.

By the time Harriet met John Stuart Mill in 1830, she was already married to John Taylor and was the mother of his two children.¹⁸ While pregnant with their third, and last, child, she began her career as a writer for the *Monthly Repository*, publishing poems, book reviews, and articles; around the same time, the friendship between Harriet and Mill "quickly escalated into love" (Jacobs 1994, 134). Though she separated briefly from her husband, Harriet Taylor soon made arrangements that allowed her to live relatively respectably with John Taylor while still maintaining her relationship with Mill, who not only visited with her in the evenings and on weekends, but who also traveled with her extensively until her husband's death in 1849. During this time, Harriet Taylor wrote "The Enfranchisement of Women," newspaper articles and a pamphlet on domestic violence, and one chapter of Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*. In 1851, after John Taylor's death, Harriet and Mill finally married. They continued to collaborate, working together on both *On Liberty* and on John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. Harriet Taylor Mill died in 1858, before either work was fully completed and published.

In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill praises his wife quite highly, calling her "the most admirable person I had ever known" and extolling her "penetrating and intuitive intelligence" as well as her "meditative and poetic nature" (*Autobiography*, 193). Despite his (in)famously rigorous education at the hands James Mill and Jeremy Bentham, two of his

¹⁸This biographical information on the Mills is taken from the works of Jo Ellen Jacobs (1994, 1998a, 2002), the foremost contemporary scholar on Harriet Taylor Mill and her relationship and collaboration with John Stuart Mill.

time's more eminent philosophers, John Stuart Mill admits of Harriet that "I have learnt more from her than from all other persons taken together" (*Autobiography*, 196). In his dedication to *On Liberty*, Mill laments that a few of the more important sections of his work never received the benefit of Harriet's editing. "Were I but capable of interpreting to the world one half the great thoughts and noble feelings which are buried in her grave," Mill writes, "I should be the medium of a greater benefit to it, than is ever likely to arise from anything that I can write, unprompted and unassisted by her all but unrivalled wisdom" (*On Liberty*, 69). The existing evidence supports Mill's claims that he and Harriet worked together closely; there are manuscripts of joint work that bear Harriet's edits and commentary, writings in Harriet's hand from as early as 1831 that outline some of the central arguments in *On Liberty*, and letters between Harriet and John in which both share ideas and reference their joint work on various manuscripts (Jacobs 1998a).¹⁹ Still, Mill's effusive praise of Harriet Taylor Mill has not been taken kindly by his critics; in fact, one points out that "Mill's exaggerated estimate of Harriet's talents and virtues has embarrassed many of his disciples" (Pyle 1995, ix-x). Charitably to John Stuart Mill, he also adds that this "affects the arguments not one jot" (Pyle 1995, x).

Not everyone has been quite so kind to Harriet Taylor Mill, and it is ultimately her intellectual reputation that has suffered the most at the hands of the critics. Nineteenth-century commentator Alexander Bain charged what he considered to be Mill's overblown, unrealistic, and unproven estimate of Harriet's intellect as the mechanism that "sabotaged Harriet's reputation" (Sumner 1974, 511; see also Bain 1882). At any rate, as Linda Zerilli notes, "Harriet Taylor has been blamed for everything that Mill's readers find inconsistent or

¹⁹One can only imagine that this evidence might be even stronger had so many of Harriet Taylor Mill's letters and other papers not been destroyed after her death, many during the blitz of World War II.

undesirable in his writing” (1992, 193). Jo Ellen Jacobs puts it more forcefully: “Harriet has been branded everything short of Wicked Witch of the West by John’s biographers and historians of philosophy” (2002, xxii). The reality is that the great majority of critics have considered Harriet’s contributions to Mill’s thought insignificant, if not detrimental. At best, she is ignored—I made it through my entire undergraduate study of political theory, reading Mill several times, without ever knowing that Harriet, not to mention the contributions she made to Mill’s work, even existed. At worst, the critics call her stupid and frigid, accuse her of bewitching John Stuart Mill, and lament her considerable influence over him, assuming that it weakened his genius.²⁰

There are several explanations for what might be considered the “ad feminam attacks” that Harriet Taylor Mill’s reputation has withstood (Jacobs 1994, 133). In one of the first full-scale defenses of Harriet, Alice Rossi (1970) suggests three different reasons for this harsh criticism: disagreement between Philosophical radicals and Unitarian Radicals, critics’ opinions about socialism, and plain, old-fashioned sexism. Believing in reform of the legal system as the cure for social ills, the Philosophical radicals argued “that the greatest division in society was that between the aristocracy and ‘the people’” (Jacobs 1994, 149). Unitarian radicals disagreed, citing a division between the working class and the middle class in addition to that between the middle class and the aristocracy; they also eschewed legal reform in favor of personal and social reform (Jacobs 1994). While Jeremy Bentham and James Mill fell firmly into the Philosophical radical camp, Harriet was a Unitarian, and many observers attributed John Stuart Mill’s rejection of his father’s philosophy to Harriet. Rossi shows that many of the harshest critics of Harriet were and are sympathizers with or scholars

²⁰For an excellent reconstruction of Harriet Taylor Mill criticism, see Jacobs 1994. See also August 1975, Le Doeuf 1987, Rose 1983, Rossi 1970, and Tulloch 1989.

of Philosophical radicals. Also blamed for Mill's move toward socialism, Harriet's influence is considered especially powerful and damaging by those commentators who reject socialism. Finally, Rossi points out that Harriet's refusal to comply with Victorian gender norms account for a large part of the criticism leveled against her. As Jo Ellen Jacobs (1994) argues, Harriet's insistence on asking difficult questions, her strong, practical nature, and her radical ideas made her a less-than-ideal picture of Victorian and even contemporary womanhood.

Interestingly, Jacobs also points out what few people have admitted about John Stuart Mill—he was not exactly adept at the necessities of day-to-day life: “To a man who could not clothe himself until he was ten years old, who, as an adult, was shocked to discover that the house required more coal in winter than summer, and who couldn't accomplish the difficult task of finding a seat for himself and his wife on a train by himself, Harriet was a savior” (Jacobs 1994, 151). Rather than recognizing the important role that Harriet's strength and practicality played in her husband's life, however, critics resent and castigate her for being “pushy” and “domineering” (Jacobs 1994, 151). Jacobs also takes Rossi's account further to draw parallels between the periods of the most active and unfavorable criticism of Harriet Taylor Mill and the periods of backlash against feminism. During such periods, she points out, criticism of Harriet reached a fevered pitch, while during periods of feminist progress, the critics were either quieter or less derogatory. “The history of the criticism of Harriet,” she argues, “is a history in miniature of women during the past one hundred years” (Jacobs 1994, 150). Finally, Jacobs insists, the relationships between philosophers and their female love interests has never been understood, and neither has the

collaboration between romantic partners more generally.²¹ Married couples working together, like John Lennon and Yoko Ono or Bill and Hillary Clinton, she points out, remain misunderstood: “A double star. We still have trouble imagining such a constellation” (Jacobs 1994, 157; see also Rose 1983).

Ultimately, Harriet Taylor Mill knew that her intellectual activism against domestic violence and her philosophical writings, especially those on women, were likely to make her unpopular. And, while she worked quite hard to protect herself and her family from gossip about their personal lives, she recognized that her arguments in works such as “The Enfranchisement of Women” were not necessarily going to bolster her own reputation. In fact, she writes, “It requires unusual moral courage as well as disinterestedness in a woman, to express opinions favourable to women’s enfranchisement, until, at least, there is some prospect of obtaining it” (“The Enfranchisement of Women,” 71). One Harriet Taylor Mill scholar has used this statement to argue that the “moral courage” to which it refers is evidence of the emotional motivation and basis of Harriet’s writing (Hackleman 1992); I’d also like to suggest that it reflects Harriet’s recognition that in advocating women’s enfranchisement, she was indeed risking her reputation.

Still, despite her willingness to espouse radical ideas, Harriet was much more conservative in regard to her personal life. “Living independently of her husband from her mid-twenties until her husband’s death was not an easy task for a Victorian woman. If she were to prevent open scandal, Harriet must tread carefully. And that she did” (Jacobs 1998a, xix). She constantly went to extraordinary lengths to avoid any hint of impropriety and to protect the privacy and reputations of her children, John Taylor, John Stuart Mill, and herself.

²¹One commentator suggested that the relationship between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his mistress might provide a framework for thinking about Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill’s attachment, a suggestion that was vigorously contested by Harriet’s granddaughter Mary Taylor.

When her daughter Helen Taylor began work in the theater under the stage name “Miss Trevor,” Harriet advised her to mail letters from post offices far from where she lived to protect her identity (Jacobs 1998b). She was irritated when her son Algernon did not take pains to disguise his travel destinations from the servants and was truly outraged when John Stuart Mill gave an inn where they were staying permission to post their real names by the front entrance (“Letters to Helen Taylor,” 532 and 575). “It might easily get into the paper from this & show that we were alone—you may imagine how vexed I am at this—he said they asked him & he did not know I cared!” (“Letters to Helen Taylor,” 575). She even requested that Helen check the papers to make sure Mill’s oversight had not led to such unwanted publicity (“Letters to Helen Taylor,” 576). Despite this foible on John Stuart Mill’s part, he, too, exhibited care with the couple’s reputations. “Mill was notoriously secretive about his relationship with Taylor and was quick to disown those friends whom he suspected of spreading rumors about the impropriety of their long friendship” (Zerilli 1992, 194).

Notwithstanding the care that Harriet and (usually) John Stuart Mill took to maintain their privacy, the couple “faced constant gossip” (Jacobs 1998a, xiii). It is interesting to think about the ways in which this fact of their lives may have influenced their work, especially their strong arguments on the stifling dangers of public opinion. It is equally fascinating to observe that so many of the problems that they identified in society’s estimation of women, their place, and their abilities has been borne out in the history of the criticism of Harriet Taylor Mill. When it comes to the work of John Stuart Mill, I agree with Gail Tulloch “that Harriet Taylor’s influence was clearly considerable” (1989, 72). I do not doubt that John Stuart Mill’s influence was equally considerable in the work of Harriet

herself. Though I attribute their writings to each individually, both for ease and clarity and because it is customary, I am mindful of the very permeable borders between the two, and I hope that the reader will be mindful of this, as well.

In the following sections, I provide a brief reconstruction of Mill's arguments about the dangers of a too-strong public opinion. While most commentators have focused on Mill's prescriptions for avoiding the "tyranny of the majority," I want to think about the ways in which Mill's concerns about the power of opinion over the individual are related to reputation. In other words, in addition to discussing the problems that adherence to custom creates for Mill, I also focus on the main mechanism by which this adherence is enforced: reputation. Moving to a discussion of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill's arguments about the particular effects of reputation's power over women, I focus on the liberatory potential of their claims. Along the way, I compare Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill's arguments about reputation to those provided by Rousseau, identifying some similarities that help to create an opportunity to reconceptualize Mill's liberalism and some differences that provide an instructive counterpoint to Rousseau's prescriptions for women. Finally, I end with a discussion of the things we can learn about reputation and gossip from the work of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill.

Public Opinion and the Tyranny of the Majority

John Stuart Mill is famous for his forceful criticism of the overwhelming power of public opinion, which he labels "one of the greatest active social forces" (*Considerations on Representative Government*, 197). In his critical appraisal to Alexis de Tocqueville's second volume of *Democracy in America*, John Stuart Mill argues that "The despotism...of the majority within the limits of civil life, though a real evil, does not appear to us to be a

formidable one. The tyranny which we fear, and which M. de Tocqueville principally dreads, is of another kind—a tyranny not over the body but over the mind” (xxviii). He worries that “there is also in the world at large an increasing inclination to stretch unduly the powers of society over the individual...by the force of opinion” (*On Liberty*, 82). And he argues that in any government “Protection...against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there needs protection also against the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling” (*On Liberty*, 73).

For Mill, the dangers of what he sees as a too-strong public opinion are multifaceted. In the first place, as one scholar puts it, public opinion “is not merely *held* by the mass, the content is actually *provided* by them as well, and the influence of persons of distinction in setting opinion virtually excluded” (Hampsher-Monk 1992, 374, emphasis in original). What this means is that public opinion is not only monolithic, but it is also prosaic and mundane; its content is provided not by the most brilliant minds, but by those who are duller and less educated, and the effect is what Mill scathingly calls “collective mediocrity” (*On Liberty*, 134). Further, and related to this first point, Mill sees the lack of contestation over public opinion as a mechanism that inhibits the search for truth, for

“the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error” (*On Liberty*, 85).

Here, Mill argues that dissent is valuable in itself; it can bolster the strength and influence of previously held beliefs, or it can point out the error of such beliefs. No matter what the scenario, Mill urges, truth is not served by silent and unexamined acquiescence to the

opinions of the masses. It is public opinion, working to stifle individual difference, in Mill's estimation, that is "the greatest threat to truth and free inquiry" (Hall 1975, 569).

It might seem to stand to reason, given his first criticism of public opinion, that Mill would have fewer problems with an all-powerful set of public opinions, given that they were provided by the "right" people. And this conclusion could well be partly accurate. But in addition to the problems Mill identifies with the content of public opinion, as well as its providers, he is especially concerned about the effects of public opinion on individuality. Mill famously argues that "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind" (*On Liberty*, 82). The formation and expression of opinions, for Mill, have a central role in personal, intellectual, and moral development. In squelching the drive to express and to form opinions, then, an all-powerful public opinion does more than just provide a sub-par set of beliefs or inhibit the quest for truth, it also retards individual self-development and stifles individual liberty. When people are encouraged or forced to yield to the opinions of others rather than employing their own intellectual powers, Mill writes, "the price paid for this sort of intellectual pacification is the sacrifice of the entire moral courage of the human mind" (*On Liberty*, 100). In addition to causing this loss of moral courage, blind obedience to custom, the lack of practice of thinking for themselves, saps people of much of what it means to be human: "their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures" (*On Liberty*, 129).

John Stuart Mill is insistent in his writing that the influence of public opinion is growing. Associating the increasing overall power of public opinion with the spread of

democratic forms of government in which leaders are responsible to adhering to the will of the people, Mill argues that the people's will has grown, unchecked, into a power that is just as dangerous as that of unaccountable tyrants. Much like Rousseau, however, Mill also sees the increasing power of public opinion over individuals themselves as a result of the enervating and softening effects of civilization. Despite their many and significant differences, some of Mill's writing on this subject sounds eerily like something Jean-Jacques Rousseau might have written himself. "There has crept over the refined classes, over the whole class of gentlemen in England, a moral effeminacy, an inaptitude for every kind of struggle" (*Civilization*, 131). The refinement, manners, and politeness that civilization entails serves "to bring about an unwillingness to suffer, physically or socially, for worthy objects, in short, a decline in heroism" (Hampsher-Monk 1992, 350). Mill is quite explicit that a large part of this decline has to do with the attention that people pay to their reputations, their intense fear of being gossiped about, stigmatized, or even ostracized by their contemporaries.

Though Mill uses language here that is quite different from that of Rousseau and the other proponents of the early modern reputational discourse, he, too, is concerned with the problems that can arise when people care too much what others think. "[L]ittle needs be expected from the men of the present day," Mill explains (*Civilization*, 131). "They cannot undergo labour, they cannot brook ridicule, they cannot brave evil tongues: they have not the hardihood to say an unpleasant thing to any one whom they are in the habit of seeing, or to face, even with a nation at their back, the coldness of some little coterie which surrounds them" (*Civilization*, 131-132). Harriet Taylor Mill also makes a similar point in her *Enfranchisement of Women*: "the intense constitutional shyness of Englishmen makes them

of all things fear ridicule” (47). Putting forth unpopular opinions or living life in a way that might be deemed eccentric may require a minimal amount of bravery in even the best of circumstances, Mill admits, but he is quick to downplay the courage that doing so requires. When all people have to fear is “to be ill-thought of and ill-spoken of,” he points out, “this it ought not to require a very heroic mould to enable them to bear” (*On Liberty*, 100). But the growing unwillingness of people to do so, he argues, creates a cycle in which public opinion becomes increasingly homogenized, making it even more difficult to stand in contradiction to it. “This torpidity and cowardice, as a general characteristic,” he points out, “is new in the world” (*Civilization*, 132).

In addition to his recognition of the role that the desire for a good reputation plays in sabotaging the willingness to hold unpopular opinions, Mill, like Rousseau, is also fearful of the way in which reputation becomes simultaneously more powerful and progressively more meaningless in societies that are larger and less intimate. “The individual becomes so lost in the crowd, that though he depends more and more upon opinion, he is apt to depend less and less upon well-grounded opinion: upon the opinion of those who know him. An established character becomes at once more difficult to gain, and more easily to be dispensed with” (*Civilization*, 132). As the population grows, Mill argues, reputation becomes less useful, less accurate, and less of an incentive to behave in ways that are truly honorable. A quiet and daily performance of hard work and honesty, for example, is lost in a sea of characteristics that are louder and more ostentatious. Here, Mill’s words are an extraordinary echo of Rousseau’s own argument. “Success, in so crowded a field, depends *not upon what a person is, but upon what he seems*: mere marketable qualities become the object instead of substantial ones, and man’s labour and capital are expended less in doing anything, than in

persuading other people that he has done it” (*Civilization*, 133, emphasis added). Just like Rousseau, Mill exhibits concern with the degree to which people funnel their energies into appearing in ways that will garner them good reputations instead of actually behaving in ways that are deserving of a good reputation. As communities grow, public opinion becomes more and more powerful and less and less accurate. And this is Mill’s biggest lament of all: “Thus public opinion loses another of those simple criteria of desert, which, and which alone, it is capable of correctly applying: and the very cause which has rendered it omnipotent in the gross, weakens the precision and force with which its judgment is brought home to individuals” (*Civilization*, 133).

On the one hand, then, Mill criticizes the effects of public opinion as stifling and oppressive; on the other, he hints that, were it deployed differently, public opinion might have some potential for encouraging desirable behaviors. This is a contradiction that I will continue to expand upon and explore later. But first, however, I’d like to turn to the work of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill on women’s oppression. It is here that the Mills recognize the more systematic ways that public opinion can work to stifle whole classes of people, rather than just individuals. While this stance on the subjection of women will complicate John Stuart Mill’s arguments about public opinion even further, it will also provide a useful counterargument to the one made earlier by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Public Opinion and the Subjection of Women

“And every step in the recognition of the power of opinion is a guarantee for the improvement of women” (“Education of Women,” 7).

In their writings on women, both Mills attribute a large part of women’s oppression to the stifling effects of public opinion. In her *Enfranchisement of Women*, Harriet Taylor Mill presents an argument that identifies the source of women’s subordination and rejects the

notion that this subordination is natural. She also explains how women have been deceived into accepting their subordination, arguing that, despite this acceptance, women should be granted full enfranchisement.²² While Harriet Taylor Mill argues that women's oppression stems from their economic dependence on men, her argument is underpinned by her assertion that public opinion and enforced concern with reputation play a huge role in making women's subordination appear to be legitimate. "And the case of women is," she writes, "a peculiar one, for no other inferior caste that we have heard of have been taught to regard degradation as their honour" (*Enfranchisement of Women*, 70). Much like Mary Wollstonecraft before her, Harriet Taylor Mill recognizes that women are controlled by the necessity of caring what other people think of them. And she also suggests that this necessity makes women's focus myopic and damaging to both themselves and to their communities more generally: "Public spirit, sense of duty towards the public good, is of all virtues, as women are now educated and situated, the most rarely to be found among them; they have seldom even, what in men is often a partial substitute for public spirit, a sense of personal honour connected with any public duty" (*Enfranchisement of Women*, 69). Rather, Harriet Taylor Mill argues, women's highest duty is "to make themselves agreeable to other people" (*Enfranchisement of Women*, 66). In making themselves agreeable, women expend their energies in ways that preclude citizenship. And being agreeable, of course, means avoiding any efforts to overthrow the system that subordinates them.

John Stuart Mill is even more explicit about the way in which public opinion works to control women in his *The Subjection of Women*. Noting that every woman "is brought up to think custom and opinion her sovereign rule," Mill takes on the critics of women's

²²For an excellent (and brief) critical summary of Harriet Taylor Mill's *Enfranchisement of Women*, see Seiz and Pujol, 2000.

enfranchisement who argue that women have chosen the role that they fulfill (*The Subjection of Women*, 25). Rather, he argues, women would not choose subjection “when any other means were open to them of filling a conventionally honourable place in life” (*The Subjection of Women*, 28). Thus, he suggests, women behave in the way that public opinion dictates, in large part for fear of what others would think should they not. While many of his contemporaries insist that women are not suited for public life, Mill argues that it is impossible to identify all of the talents that women might possess or the aspirations they may have were their individuality not stifled by strict adherence to custom.

What is perhaps most interesting about John Stuart Mill’s discussion of women’s subordination and its relationship to public opinion is the way that he identifies and characterizes the desire for reputation. In works like *Civilization* and *On Liberty*, Mill tends to describe the desire for reputation or the concern with what others think as either an aberration precipitated by contemporary life or as a moral failing that signals a distinct lack of courage. In *The Subjection of Women*, on the other hand, Mill makes the claim that the concern with reputation is more fundamental or natural:

“The *natural desire of consideration from our fellow-creatures* is as strong in a woman as in a man; but society has so ordered things that public consideration is, in all ordinary cases, only attainable by her through the consideration of her husband or of her male relations, while her private consideration is forfeited by making herself individually prominent, or appearing in any other character than that of an appendage to men” (*The Subjection of Women*, 75).

Here, Mill is making an argument about the channels through which women can satisfy their “desire for consideration” or their hope that other people will think well of them. Still, his insistence on calling this desire “natural” is puzzling in light of some of his other appraisals of the desire for reputation as discussed earlier. And this is not simply an isolated remark; in

a less stark version of the same claim, Mill says that “consideration” is “the principal object of human pursuit” (*The Subjection of Women*, 15). It is not insignificant, as I will argue later, that Mill’s emphasis on the desire for reputation as so central to human life manifests in his writings on women, but it is important to note how much of Mill’s discussion of women’s subordination relies upon his appraisal of their particular and somewhat unique relationship with public opinion.

Unlike Rousseau, the Mills focus less on women’s sexual reputations and more on the way in which concern with what others will think of them keeps women from speaking out about their status, admitting that they might like to fulfill roles other than those that are prescribed for them, or attempting to enter public life.²³ But the Mills’ arguments about the effects of women’s subordination are an interesting counterpoint to those of Rousseau. While Rousseau argued that women’s sexuality and virtue in fact gives them power over men, both Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill explicitly disagree with this premise. The latter suggests that women’s sexuality-based influence is often fleeting, “for their power only lasts while the woman is young and attractive, often only while her charm is new, and not dimmed by familiarity; and on many men they have not much influence at any time” (*The Subjection of Women*, 37). Further, Harriet Taylor Mill points out, any small amount of power that their sexuality might afford them is wasted by women who, given their circumstances, do not understand “what a power it might be,” and can employ it only to gain frivolities, “whatever they find sufficient for their desires” (“Legislative Interference in Matters of Feeling,” 21). At any rate, John Stuart Mill posits, women are hardly served by

²³Harriet Taylor Mill does, however, make the point that women’s lack of sexual experience is considered a prerequisite for her to enter a marriage contract, making it “the only contract I ever heard of, of which a necessary condition in the contracting parties was, that one should be entirely ignorant of the nature and terms of the contract” (“The Nature of the Marriage Contract,” 19).

this limited form of power; rather than granting them the equal rights that they deserve, he insists, this power tells a woman “that the measure of what she has a right to, is what she can contrive to get” (*The Subjection of Women*, 42).

Beyond this disagreement with Rousseau about the extent to which their sexuality provides women power and influence over men, the Mills also see the effects of women’s influence differently than does Rousseau. While Rousseau argued that women’s influence within the family is one that inspires virtue and public spirit in men, the Mills suggest the opposite: that, because of women’s exclusion from public life and higher forms of thought, women’s influence on men is less than beneficial. John Stuart Mill calls the family “a school of willfulness, overbearingness, unbounded selfish indulgence, and a double-dyed and idealised selfishness” because of the incommensurate power that men have over their wives and children (*The Subjection of Women*, 36). Further, Mill argues that, given their station, women are unable to understand what public life requires, which means they actually end up sabotaging their husband’s public virtue and individual development. In fact, he points out, because their only status is gained through their husbands, women, mindful of their own reputations, encourage men to bow to custom rather than to form or share innovative or unpopular opinions: “The wife is the auxiliary of the common public opinion” (*The Subjection of Women*, 89).

Harnessing the Power of Public Opinion

Despite his strong arguments against the intellectually stifling and oppressive effects of public opinion, Mill is, much like Rousseau before him, drawn to the attempt to harness the power of reputation in spite of its dangers. There is ultimately quite a tension in Mill’s work between his rejection of reputation and his desire to use reputation in a way that will

help bolster his overall vision; still, I want to argue, there are ways in which this tension is ameliorated, if not dissolved entirely, in Mill's discussion of reputation. First, in an argument that is reminiscent of Rousseau's, Mill suggests that reputation works quite differently in different contexts. While Mill argues, as I suggested above, that reputation is often baseless and lacking "of those simple criteria of desert" (*Civilization*, 133) in large cities or other heavily populated areas, he also argues that in small societies, public opinion "exercises its most salutary influence" (*Civilization*, 132). The tradesman in such a small society, he points out, "will acquire the character, individually and professionally, which his conduct entitles him to" (*Civilization*, 133).

Beyond Mill's recognition that reputation works best in certain contexts, however, is his desire to reclaim what is useful about public opinion, to reform what he argues has become ineffectual or even meaningless. He mourns what he identifies as "the diminished efficacy of public opinion as a restraining power" in civilization, acknowledging all of the ways in which public opinion can in fact motivate people toward useful objects (*Civilization*, 135).²⁴ In fact, he admits that even within his own time period, the one of which he is so critical, the increased power of public opinion has had the positive effect of discouraging "at least the indecorous vices" (*Civilization*, 132). He continues "as that restraining power gains strength, and certain classes or individuals cease to possess a virtual exemption from it, the change is highly favourable to the outward decencies of life" (*Civilization*, 132).

An improvement in those outward decencies, as one might guess, is hardly enough to satisfy Mill. Still, his recognition of the power of reputation and his acknowledgement that it can be used in ways that are beneficial is important. He highly praises systems of scholarly

²⁴He is, however, much less clear than Rousseau about what behaviors he hopes that public opinion will engender.

award that confer honors upon those who have exhibited the most hard work, promise, and achievement. He calls for “an end to every kind of unearned distinction” and urges that “the only road open to honour and ascendancy be that of personal qualities” (*Civilization*, 147). Ultimately, Mill puts the power of reputation in terms almost as strong as Rousseau’s: “The only adventitious motive it is in the power of society to hold out,” he insists, “is reputation and consequence; and of this as much use as possible should be made for the encouragement of desert” (*Civilization*, 147).

While Mill and Rousseau may agree that the effects of the desire for reputation can be damaging in certain contexts and entirely useful in others, their reasons for such an argument and the conclusions they draw from it are, of course, quite different in many respects. First, though he writes forcefully about the strong propensity of the desire for reputation to encourage conformity, Mill vacillates between recognizing this desire as a fundamental feature of human psychology in the way that Rousseau and the other proponents of early modern reputational discourse do and arguing that the desire for reputation, or at least the tendency to give into it, is a trait that is relatively new, one that signals a deterioration of hardiness and moral courage. Rousseau is very clear about his prescriptions to use the human desire for reputation to elicit virtues that he deems necessary for meaningful political life. Mill, on the other hand, seems to walk a thin line between criticizing and attempting to correct the homogenizing effects of public opinion and advocating individual resistance to caring what other people think. His stance is made even more complicated by his explicit recognition, noted above, that reputation is “the only adventitious motive it is in the power of society to hold out” (*Civilization*, 147).

In his prescriptions in *On Liberty*, which are not directed exclusively toward the more face-to-face contexts in which Mill argues that public opinion works best, he posits people's opinions of others as an auxiliary method of ensuring appropriate actions. "Mill, despite his misgivings, does allow public opinion a censorial role in inhibiting behaviour which is not strictly nor properly illegal, and perhaps only selfish" (Hampsher-Monk 1992, 377). On the one hand, a central tenet of Mill's project in *On Liberty* is to convince his readers of the problems with public opinion and the damaging ways in which stigma and mockery can discourage healthy dissent, invaluable experiments of living, and, ultimately, individual liberty and development. On the other hand, as Hampsher-Monk notes, Mill does not see all of the mechanisms of public opinion as ones that ought to be eradicated. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill argues that "education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole" (18). He even advocates gossip as a method of warning one's acquaintances about the foolhardy behavior of others. Of an individual deemed unfavorable, he writes, "We have a right, and it may be our duty, to caution others against him" (*On Liberty*, 146). It is also the right of every individual, as part of his or her own self-development and freedom of thought and expression, Mill insists, to hold any opinion of another person and to share that opinion freely.

At first glance, these contradictions in Mill's work are puzzling. Is the desire for reputation and the attempt to satisfy it natural, or at least universal, or is the tendency to yield to this desire the product of a decline in moral courage? Is public opinion dangerous and stifling, or can it be used as a method to encourage actions that are appropriate in regard to others? I want to argue that the answers to these questions, while not in themselves

unproblematic, are ones that serve to break down what seem like contradictions in Mill's argument, easing the either/or distinctions that these questions imply. First, Mill, unlike Rousseau, acknowledges the differential effects of reputational policing on different classes of people in society. Second, he also sees varying extremes in the sorts of social sanctions that reputational policing entails. Finally, he envisions a world that has in many ways become a reality, a world in which public opinion is not entirely monolithic and that has myriad alternative communities that support and embrace those who hold opinions that may be wildly unpopular among the mainstream.²⁵

In *On Liberty*, Mill differentiates between those who can afford to lose their reputations and those who cannot. "In respect to all persons but those whose pecuniary circumstances make them independent of the good will of other people," he writes, "opinion...is just as efficacious as law; men might as well be imprisoned, as excluded from the means of earning their bread" (99). While those of means, the rich and elite, risk nothing more than taunts and jeers for resisting the dictates of public opinion, others, such as women or members of the poor or middle classes, face loss of their livelihood and means of subsistence. It is no accident that Mill calls the failure of the elite to stand against public opinion "moral effeminacy," for women are among the least able to defy custom without risk of severe retribution (*Civilization*, 131). I believe, then, that Mill's acknowledgement of the universality of the desire for reputation in *The Subjection of Women* is genuine; he does not deny that even members of the elite probably do care what other people think of them. Rather, he calls upon and expects those who can reasonably expect to survive the possible

²⁵Whether or not the existence of such widely varied communities is conducive to the collision of ideas that Mill saw as so vitally important is certainly an open question, but, unfortunately, is not one that I am able to address as part of this chapter.

damage to their reputations, however, to be a counterforce to the significant power of public opinion.

Mill is quite explicit in setting up limits to his assertion that people can use their opinions of others to direct their behavior. In the first place, he differentiates between those sanctions that ought to have the force of law and those that should remain “sanctions of opinion” (*Utilitarianism*, 22). “Mill distinguishes (although not always or clearly) between what ‘society’ in the sense of the state may impose on us, and what ‘society’ in the looser sense of public opinion, may do” (Hampsher-Monk 1992, 376). While the former may regulate only those actions that are other-regarding, the line is much less distinct when it comes to the latter.²⁶ Still, Mill argues that there are differing degrees to which people may be subjected to reputational harm, and he insists that this “is not a merely nominal distinction” (*On Liberty*, 147). When an individual performs an action that neglects or impinges upon the rights of others, Mill says, he deserves social retribution. If the same individual merely “displeases us,” according to Mill, “we may express our distaste, and we may stand aloof from a person as well as from a thing that displeases us; but we shall not therefore feel called upon to make his life uncomfortable” (*On Liberty*, 147). In fact, he explains, “the worst we shall think ourselves justified in doing is leaving him to himself” (*On Liberty*, 148). Mill is careful to point out that finding oneself in the situation of being avoided by others is the natural consequence of being disliked by or offending others, rather than a true form of punishment. Thus, for Mill, there is a very marked and important distinction between expressing indifference toward someone by politely “leaving him to himself” and actively “making his life uncomfortable” by ostracizing him as a form of social

²⁶As J.S. McClelland points out, “Mill scholars have had a field-day showing that Mill’s distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding actions is not sustainable” (1996, 475). I want acknowledge this controversy, though I will have to excuse myself from joining in this particular debate here.

retribution. Another way of thinking about this is that experiencing indifference from others is the result of having a poor reputation, rather than harm to one's reputation itself.

Finally, Mill believes that space needs to exist in which those who defy public opinion can find reinforcements. In his appraisal of de Tocqueville's second volume of *Democracy in America*, John Stuart Mill writes that "there should exist somewhere a great social support for opinions and sentiments different from those of the masses" (xlix). Mill admits that the location for this space must vary based on the circumstances of each society; however, he explicitly suggests that in his own time, it is dependent upon certain classes to provide it. He identifies "an agricultural class, a leisured class, and a learned class" ("Introduction to *Democracy in America* Volume II," xlix). While the first is happy to take direction from the other two, Mill says, the leisured and learned classes are the best equipped to create the support necessary for unpopular opinions and, he intimates, it is members of these classes who will be the most likely to develop and share the sorts of opinions that require such support.

Conclusion

There is much to be learned about reputation from Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill's accounts of public opinion. Their recognition of the power of public opinion and their understanding of the way in which it can work as an oppressive force are, in and of themselves, instructive. Perhaps even more important, however, are the nuances that John Stuart Mill provides in his account of reputation. Unlike Rousseau, Mill argues that the loss of reputation affects people differently, and that some can withstand having others think poorly of them more than others. The material effects of loss of reputation mean that, for many, it requires more than just moral courage to speak out in contradiction to public opinion

or to live in a way that is contrary to custom. In thinking of reputation in this way, Mill complicates Rousseau's assertion that we are all driven by the desire for reputation; while this assertion may well be true, there is more room for some than others to behave in ways that might damage their reputations. This is, of course, an argument that is muddled in Mill's discussion of social sanctions in *On Liberty*, in particular. If, as he suggests, it is acceptable to "leave alone" those of whom we disapprove or those with whom we disagree, won't there be some who are more capable and better equipped materially to be "left alone" than others? And doesn't this mean that, as a consequence, some will have more freedom of thought and expression than others? Mill would almost certainly answer this objection by citing the communities of support for dissension that he advocates, but given that these communities are, for his purposes, comprised of those in the learned and leisured classes, some question remains as to the abilities of all to exercise the all-important personal development that freedom of thought and expression fosters in Mill's schema.

It also seems important to return to the lives of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill themselves in considering the latter's point that some people are better equipped to suffer reputational harm than others. On the one hand, John Stuart Mill's economic security and position as an eminent thinker in his time did allow him to live in a rather unconventional relationship with someone who, for most of their association, was a married woman. And, Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill were willing to risk their intellectual reputations by advancing unpopular arguments in their writings. On the other hand, as I have noted, both Mills were acutely aware of the gossip that surrounded them, often taking extreme measures to avoid such gossip and the more personal reputational harm that it might cause. This second point might suggest that ignoring the assessments of others, especially when it comes

to experiments of living, may not be as easy as Mill implies, even for someone in his very enviable position. Yet careful attention to the Mills' situation raises a point that Mill himself misses: the loss of one's reputation can harm more than just oneself. For Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill, the discretion with which they handled their relationship was not just about protecting their own reputations; Harriet Taylor had her husband and children to think about, as well. Ultimately, despite the fact that attention to reputation for the protection of others was necessary in his own life, the willful disregard of reputation that Mill advocates for certain well-placed individuals is often an other-regarding act that Mill fails to consider.

Further, if Mill is, as one commentator calls him, the "schoolmaster of liberalism," then liberalism still has quite a bit to learn from its teacher (McClelland 1996, 451). It is not just law, Mill repeatedly insists, that stifles and oppresses people. In fact, he is quite clear that public opinion plays an equally, if not more, powerful role in limiting freedom. As noted above, Mill wants to suggest that some people have more choice than others about whether to comply with these limits. Still, Mill provides a point that is, in part, an answer to the frustration that has guided my project, a nagging feeling that ignoring reputation means missing an important aspect of relationships of power: in contemporary liberal democracies, there is something beyond the merely legal that limits and oppresses. In fact, there are many things. But Mill helps us to recognize that reputation, that what other people think of us, can be just as powerful as law.

In the next chapter, I begin to think more carefully about the power inherent in reputational politics, as well as the way in which reputation works in contexts of wildly incommensurate power. Using George Orwell's novel *Burmese Days*, I explore his account

of the politics of reputation in colonial Burma, suggesting that this account has much to say about reputation and power beyond the boundaries of the particular colonial context.

CHAPTER 4

A DIFFICULT BUSINESS: REPUTATION, GOSSIP, AND POWER IN GEORGE ORWELL'S BURMA

“Prestige, the breath of life, is itself nebulous” (*Burmese Days*, 79).

Burmese Days is George Orwell's first published novel, written in 1932 and 1933 and printed in the United States in 1934. The story of an English timber merchant set in 1920s Burma, the novel also is, as one scholar aptly notes, Orwell's first to explore the theme of domination (Patai 1984). Often heralded by critics as Orwell's anti-colonial tract, *Burmese Days* is more than just an indictment of empire or a cautionary tale about the problems with domination. A central theme of the novel is articulated by its narrator above: prestige is the breath of life. *Burmese Days* provides a truly fascinating and instructive commentary on the way in which reputation is constitutive of power, the dangers of reputation for both those in power and their subjects, and, finally, the possibility of access to agency that reputational politics might provide. I will begin, here, by providing a brief biography of Orwell and some context on British rule of Burma before moving to the novel itself.

Born as Eric Blair in India in 1903, Orwell spent the first several years of his childhood living with his mother and sister in England while his father, an official with the Indian Civil Service, worked abroad. At the age of eight, he was sent to prep school at St. Cyprian's in Sussex; his experience there later became the subject of his scathing essay “Such, Such Were the Joys,” which was feared to be so libelous that it remained unpublished until after Orwell's death. He eventually received a scholarship to Eton, but his relatively

poor academic performance precluded collegiate study, and so Blair joined the Indian Imperial Police as an Assistant Superintendent and received his first commission in Burma in 1922. He remained there for five years, during which he competently served seven different posts, but as one biographer puts it, “he was uncomfortable among the expatriate community” (Lucas 2003, 7). When Blair contracted a fever in 1927, he was granted sick leave back in Britain and never returned to Burma. His first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, published in 1933, was based upon the years he spent in poverty and working in menial jobs following his time in Burma. In the same year his first book was published, Blair took the pseudonym by which he has come to be known; he chose “George” for reasons that remain unclear, while “Orwell” was the name of a river near his home. Over the next several years, Orwell worked as a teacher, during which time he completed *Burmese Days*, and a shopkeeper. In 1936 he married Eileen O’Shaugnessy and was commissioned to write *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a journalistic account of unemployment in the north of England. During World War II, Orwell worked as sergeant in the Home Guard and as a journalist; *Animal Farm* was written toward the end of the war. Eileen died in 1945 and, in 1949, Orwell married Sonia Brownwell. He died in 1950 of tuberculosis, not long after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Most commentators agree that, along with his essays “Shooting an Elephant” and “A Hanging,” *Burmese Days* is a reflection of Orwell’s anti-imperial stance, which was solidified during his time serving the Imperial Police in Burma. Britain’s long history of colonial rule in India began in the eighteenth century when the East India Company took control of Bengal with the help of the British army. By the 1850’s, most of the Indian sub-continent was under British control, and, after crushing the Indian rebellion of 1857, Britain

transferred all power over India from the East India Company to the Crown. In 1886, the British made Burma a province of India, and the growing rice trade made both Indian migrants and several British firms rich at the expense of the Burmese, who were displaced from their land and were largely excluded from the civil service. This began to change in the early 1900s, when a group of Burmese from the educated classes were permitted to go to England to study law and, upon their return, began to push for reform. By the 1920s, the era in which *Burmese Days* is set, these reforms had led to increased Burmese autonomy from India, as well as the inclusion of more Burmese in the civil service.

Burmese Days' plot centers around John Flory, an English timber merchant living in the small upper Burma outpost of Kyauktada. Much of the action takes place in the exclusive European Club, frequented by Flory and the other Europeans in town. When the British Commissioner, in keeping with the reforms of the time, commands the Club to admit a native member, Flory's friend Dr. Veraswami, an Indian physician, seems like the natural choice, despite the resistance of Flory's fellow Europeans. U Po Kyin, a bribe-taking and corrupt Burmese magistrate, learns of the Commissioner's order and, in an effort to ensure his own election to the Club, embarks on a plan to discredit Veraswami, a decent man and a true believer in British colonial rule.

In the meantime, Elizabeth Lackersteen arrives from Europe to stay with her aunt and uncle in the hopes of finding a husband. Elizabeth sets her sights on Flory, who expels his Burmese mistress Ma Hla May from his home so that he can woo Elizabeth, the woman he is certain will be the antidote to his loneliness. Elizabeth eventually uses Ma Hla May's existence to snub Flory in favor of a new and more eligible arrival in town: the "Honourable" Lieutenant Verrall. Though Verrall and Elizabeth spend a great deal of time

together, provoking scandal amongst the natives, a marriage proposal is not forthcoming and Verrall eventually leaves Elizabeth humiliated when he sneaks away from Kyauktada without telling her or anyone else. Turning back to Flory in a last-ditch effort both to save face and to find a husband, Elizabeth finally rejects him for good when U Po Kyin sends Ma Hla May to disgrace Flory in front of the other Europeans, the last step in his plan to discredit Veraswami, whose reputation is ultimately dependent on Flory's. In the end, Flory commits suicide, Veraswami is ruined, U Po Kyin is elected to the Club, and Elizabeth marries another of Kyauktada's Europeans.

A fifteen-year resident of Burma, John Flory's most notable physical feature is the mark on his face: "a hideous birthmark stretching in a ragged crescent down his left cheek, from the eye to the corner of the mouth" (*Burmese Days* , 17). Flory's birthmark is variously interpreted by critics as symbolic of his difference, outsider status, and alienation from the other Europeans (Stewart 2003; Brunsdale 2000; Patai 1984), as the physical representation of a lifelong stigma of cowardice and guilt (Hammond 1982), as a sign of his weakness (Meyers 1991), and as an outward manifestation of his racial ambivalence—"one side of his face is white, and the other side is dark" (Waterman 1999, 82). While good arguments for all of these interpretations ultimately make Orwell's intended significance of the birthmark difficult to discern, he makes its significance to Flory quite clear. As the subject of mockery from a young age—Flory's classmates nicknamed him "Monkey-bum" in a nod to his birthmark's bluish color—there is nothing that matters to Flory more than what other people think of him. And so he has learned to disguise his unconventional opinions, including both his admiration of Burmese culture and his anti-colonial sentiment, in the hopes of retaining his reputation in the eyes of his fellow Europeans. After all, Orwell explains, "A boy does

not start his career nicknamed Monkey-bum without learning his lesson” (*Burmese Days*, 65).

Though Flory’s concern with his reputation ultimately leads to the most tragic effects, the supporting characters in *Burmese Days* are similarly motivated. U Po Kyin, the morbidly obese and obscenely rich magistrate, is driven to ruin Veraswami not for monetary gain, but for “the very highest honour an Oriental can attain to” (*Burmese Days*, 142): membership in the Club and the prestige that association with Europeans confers. U Po Kyin’s wife Ma Kin, who routinely scolds him for his dishonesty and his political machinations, is sufficiently dazzled by the prospect of Club membership to discontinue her disapproving sermons. Orwell repeatedly reminds us that Flory’s mistress Ma Hla May does not love him, but rather is enamored with the prominence that her relationship with Flory affords, her ability to “boast of her position as a ‘bo-kadaw’—a white man’s wife” (*Burmese Days*, 54). Elizabeth Lackersteen and her aunt are easily swayed to drop Flory by the status that marrying the “Honourable” Verrall could bestow, despite the reality of his financial insolvency and caddishness. Spending a great deal of time talking about their reputations in the eyes of the native Burmese, Ellis and the other Europeans ultimately agree that “we want every bit of prestige we can get” (*Burmese Days*, 31-32). Even the good and decent Veraswami, aware of U Po Kyin’s attack against him, is realistic about the value of his reputation. “In these matters,” he tells Flory, “prestige is everything” (*Burmese Days*, 46).²⁷

Yet, even though all of *Burmese Days*’ characters are in one way or another focused on and motivated by what other people think of them, the status of their reputations have very different significance based upon their location in colonial Burma’s matrix of power.

²⁷In the novel, Veraswami hisses his “s” sounds, indicated by Orwell with extra letters. The above quotation, for example, is written in the text as “prestige iss everything.” For ease of reading, I’ve removed the extra letters in this and all other quotations from Dr. Veraswami.

Further, the ways in which their reputations are maintained, built, and destroyed are predicated upon their status within this complicated hierarchy. In this chapter, I use Orwell's rendering of reputational politics in Kyauktada to explore reputation in the context of wildly incommensurate power. Beginning with Orwell's assertions about reputation's centrality to the colonial project, I move on to think about the meaning of reputation for particular types of actors: the European colonizers, the Burmese colonized, and the women on both sides of the colonial relationship. Finally, my analysis implicitly presupposes that the observations that can be taken from Orwell's work extend beyond the particular situation of 1920s-era colonial Burma; I include a more explicit discussion and defense of this supposition, as well as some thoughts about how Orwell's story might work in dialogue with Rousseau's conception of reputation as well as Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau.

Above Suspicion: The Reputations of the Powerful

“He told Flory ‘not to start talking like a damned Hyde Park agitator,’ and then read him a snappish little sermon, taking as his text the five chief beatitudes of the pukka sahib, namely:

Keeping up our prestige,
The firm hand (without the velvet glove),
We white men must hang together,
Give them an inch and they'll take an ell, and
Esprit de corps” (*Burmese Days*, 191).

George Orwell is very explicit in his assertions about the importance of reputation in maintaining British colonial power. In the above passage, Westfield, the District Superintendent of Police and a Club member, scolds Flory for his friendship with Veraswami, which is seen by the other Europeans in Kyauktada as not only entirely inexplicable, but also as destructive to the image of superiority and power that is so central to British rule. As the first of the “five chief beatitudes of the pukka sahib,” maintaining prestige is a task that is incumbent upon the Europeans both as a group and as individuals,

and Flory's perceived abandonment of this responsibility is a continual source of conflict among the Club members. Flory is thus under dual pressure: he is expected to uphold the reputation of the British and, in so doing, to maintain his own reputation among his fellow Europeans.

It is the former kind of pressure that Orwell examines in his autobiographical essay "Shooting an Elephant," the story of a real-life incident that occurred during his time serving the Imperial Police in Burma.²⁸ Orwell writes that he was summoned by reports of an elephant rampaging in the bazaar; he arrived to find that the animal had trampled and killed an Indian "coolie." Sending for his rifle, he set off to find the beast, only to be followed by a large crowd of Burmese, all of whom were excited by the sight of the rifle and eager to see an elephant shot. When Orwell finally located it, however, the elephant's rampage, brought on by an attack of "must," was over and the animal was completely harmless. "As soon as I saw the elephant," he confesses, "I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him" ("Shooting an Elephant," 6). Confronted with the docile and extremely valuable elephant, Orwell decided that he wouldn't have to use his rifle after all. Yet, he looked at the large crowd that had gathered, two thousand of them waiting to see an elephant shot, and he realized:

"I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing—no that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at" ("Shooting an Elephant," 7).

²⁸The extent to which *Burmese Days* is drawn from Orwell's own experience working for the Imperial Police is the subject of much debate; some commentators suggest that Flory is a sketch of the man Orwell might have become had he remained longer in Burma. For more on the relationship between Orwell and Flory, see Keck 2005, Meyers 1991, and Hammond 1982.

So Orwell shot the elephant. He describes in vivid detail its long, slow death and the countless shots he fired into its heart and throat in an effort to end its suffering. His decision became a source of endless disagreement between his fellow British officials, many of whom thought it was a terrible waste to kill a perfectly good elephant over a mere coolie, and, Orwell admits, “I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool” (“Shooting an Elephant,” 9). This is the experience that finally provides Orwell, who was formerly vaguely and abstractly troubled with imperialism, with his first solid anti-imperial justification. He observes that colonial rulers are not rulers at all. Rather, he argues, they are forced to become “a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib” (“Shooting an Elephant,” 6). Those ruled, Orwell argues, are the ones whose opinions mold the behavior of the master, “[f]or it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the ‘natives,’ and so in every crisis he has got to do what the ‘natives’ expect of him” (“Shooting an Elephant,” 6). By this account, according to Orwell, colonial power is merely an illusion, for the real power to direct their rulers’ behavior is held by the colonized.

In *Burmese Days*, doing what the natives expect usually means maintaining the appearance of control where there is none. When one of the white men is killed, the overwhelming British response vengefully focuses on creating the illusion of justice: “Much better hang wrong fellow than no fellow,” they agree (*Burmese Days*, 240). But the reality is that the Europeans care only that they uphold their reputations for power, superiority, and for being, as Orwell describes in “Shooting an Elephant,” resolute and definite in the eyes of the Burmese. When it comes to other forms of behavior, the opinions of the Burmese hold no sway: the British in Kyauktada, for example, are free to begin drinking early in the morning

and to laze about all day, playing tennis in the hot evenings much to the confusion and amusement of their Burmese observers. The men keep native mistresses and have affairs with successions of Burmese women, who they later abandon along with their illegitimate children. “Keeping up prestige” ultimately has more to do with instilling fear and awe than with worrying about having poor personal reputations or being laughed at for their leisure-time behavior.

A similar standard exists among the Club members themselves, who are all perfectly willing to overlook Flory’s live-in Burmese mistress, purchased from her parents at a price of three hundred rupees, even as his friendship with Veraswami causes his reputational stock to plummet. When Veraswami warns Flory that U Po Kyin will likely attack Flory’s reputation as a way of discrediting Veraswami, Flory is far from alarmed. “Good gracious, no one would believe anything against *me*,” he tells Veraswami. “I’m an Englishman—quite above suspicion” (*Burmese Days*, 48-49, emphasis in original). Even Veraswami admits that membership in the Club confers similar status for a native: “In the Club, practically he *is* a European. No calumny can touch him. A Club member is sacrosanct” (*Burmese Days*, 47, emphasis in original). And U Po Kyin himself recognizes that his usual tactics will not work on an Englishman. “On does not *accuse* a white man,” he tells his minions, “one has got to catch him in the act” (*Burmese Days*, 262, emphasis in original).

Thus, it is only when Ma Hla May disrupts church services to demand money from Flory that they think the worse of him for his relationship with her, not because of her existence, but because of the publicity of the scene and the fact that her outburst is symptomatic of Flory’s failure to live up to the ideal of a “sahib”—he is unable to control her (Patai 1984). Yet, despite the blind eye his fellow British turn to his relationship with a

Burmese woman, Flory is repeatedly berated for the friendly social interaction he enjoys with Veraswami and, much like the narrator in “Shooting an Elephant,” Flory feels forced to behave in ways that he believes are wrong to avoid their mockery. When Flory is told by Veraswami that the only certain way the doctor can insulate himself against U Po Kyin’s attack is membership in the Club, Flory already knows about the orders that a native member must be elected. Still, he tells Veraswami that he cannot propose him for membership since doing so would require that Flory go against the other members of the club: “I’ll give you my vote, but I can’t do more than that. I’m sorry, but I simply can’t. You don’t know the row there’ll be” (*Burmese Days*, 48).

Even worse, Flory signs a public statement the very next day penned by the especially racist Ellis that calls Veraswami a “nigger” rather than face the consequences of refusal: “The nagging, the jeers!” (*Burmese Days*, 63). Later, he privately apologizes to Veraswami, explaining “it’s just that one daren’t be loyal to an Oriental when it means going against the others. It doesn’t *do*. If I’d stuck out against signing the notice I’d have been in disgrace at the Club for a week or two. So I funkyed it, as usual” (*Burmese Days*, 147, emphasis in original). The callousness of this statement is exacerbated by what seems like the ultimate pettiness on Flory’s part—publicly betraying his friend rather than suffering what he identifies as extremely short-term damage to his reputation. Still, looked at another way, Flory’s betrayal is a testament to how acutely he cares about what his fellow British think of him; he cannot bear to be in disgrace with them, if only for a week or two. And, of course, it almost goes without saying that his disloyalty to Veraswami not only preserves but also bolsters Flory’s reputation among his European peers, *especially* given the friendship between the two.

What is borne out in the example of Flory's betrayal of Veraswami is that, ultimately, the British men in Kyauktada are subject to only a certain form of reputational restraint. So long as they appear resolute, strong, and scornful of the Burmese, they are free to do as they like without fear of harming their reputations. It makes intuitive sense that Flory's treatment of his friend would, in a different context, cause others to think worse of him. But as a person who is in a position of power, Flory's first responsibility lies with the others who share his status rather than with the socially and politically inferior Veraswami. In this way, the reputational politics to which Flory is subject work not to police morality or encourage virtue, but rather to ensure adherence to the ideals that work to constitute colonial power.

A Difficult Business: The Reputations of the Colonized

For the native inhabitants of Kyauktada, reputational politics are much more complicated and dangerous than for their European counterparts. While British reputations are built on adherence to the colonial ideal and little else, there are myriad dimensions upon which native reputations can be sullied, and very few upon which they can be redeemed. When U Po Kyin begins his attack on Veraswami, Flory is not concerned. "But would anyone believe a fellow like that against you?" he asks. "He's only a low-down magistrate. You're a high official" (*Burmese Days*, 46). Still, the doctor is quite realistic about the dangers that lay ahead: "Ah, Mr. Flory, you do not understand Oriental cunning. U Po Kyin has ruined higher officials than I. He will know ways to make himself believed. And therefore—ah, it is a difficult business!" (*Burmese Days*, 46).

The only way to insulate himself against U Po Kyin's attacks, Veraswami says, is to be in good standing with the Europeans. His years of faithful service to the empire, his loyalty to the British, and his belief in the colonial project can do nothing to either build or

maintain his reputation. Whether U Po Kyin's lies about Veraswami are believed or not, Veraswami tells Flory, "depends entirely upon my standing with the Europeans. It is so that things happen in India. If our prestige is good, we rise; if bad, we fall" (*Burmese Days*, 46-47). Still, Flory's reluctance to propose Veraswami for membership in the Club makes perfect sense to Veraswami, who genuinely values Flory's reputation among the other Europeans more than his own status. It is enough that Flory is his friend, Veraswami says. "Prestige, Mr. Flory, is like a barometer. Every time you are seen to enter my house the mercury rises half a degree" (*Burmese Days*, 48).

When the Club is attacked by an angry mob of Burmese seeking to punish Ellis for his unprovoked assault of a Burmese schoolboy, it is Veraswami who rushes headlong into the crowd in a desperate attempt to save the British. Yet this act of loyalty and bravery does little to bolster his reputation among the Club members or to protect him from the lies spread by U Po Kyin. Flory is ultimately the hero, climbing out a back window of the Club and swimming downriver to the police station to issue the order to fire over the crowd's heads, causing the mob to disperse. It is only Veraswami's association with the newly canonized Flory that makes the British agree that he might not be such a bad chap after all. U Po Kyin sends Ma Hla May to discredit Flory in the church because the magistrate knows how closely Veraswami's reputation is linked with Flory's. Both Flory's disgrace and his subsequent suicide spell disaster for Veraswami, who, faithful to the end, rules Flory's death an accident to protect his friend's already sullied reputation from further damage. Veraswami has nothing to gain in this act—Flory's death means that it is already much too late for him—and he is ultimately demoted and sent away from Kyauktada.

The ruin of Flory's reputation is, in the end, based on a very real and public scene, and, as I argued earlier, is predicated not upon his affair with Ma Hla May—all of the other British were well aware of her place in Flory's household—but rather upon the ugliness of the scene she makes and his inability to control her as a masterful British man should. Flory is ultimately discredited for failing to live up to the ideal of the perfect "pukka sahib," and not for any moral or even sexual misdeeds. U Po Kyin's attacks on Veraswami, however, initiated as an anonymous letter writing campaign, accuse him of all manner of indiscretions, from performing operations while drunk to eating beef to homosexual advances on the drummer boy from the Military Police. None of the allegations about Veraswami planted by U Po Kyin could be proven, "still, it was agreed that he was a scoundrel" (*Burmese Days*, 283).

These discrepancies between the ruin of Flory and the ruin of Veraswami suggest four larger points about reputational politics and power dynamics in Kyauktada. First, the Burmese are held to higher standards of personal behavior than are their British rulers and, as such, are much more vulnerable to both attacks on their reputations and to policing of their behavior through reputational means such as gossip. Second, while the Europeans are "quite above suspicion" even when the suspicion might be warranted, the natives dwell in suspicion, and suspicion is all it takes to ruin their reputations. As U Po Kyin notes, "No European cares anything about proofs. When a man has a black face, suspicion *is* proof" (*Burmese Days*, 12, emphasis in original). Third, the reputations of the Europeans are not only practically unassailable, but are also able to be rebuilt once destroyed. Late in the novel, Flory finally does propose Veraswami for Club membership, suffering great disgrace in the eyes of the other Club members. When his act of bravery is responsible for dispersing

the mob attacking the Club, his reputation is restored. It is easy to imagine that, had he not taken his own life, Flory could have eventually counteracted Ma Hla May's scene, working his way back into the good graces of his fellow British. Veraswami, on the other hand, loses his reputation based on nebulous lies; he is only able to regain it temporarily even when he risks his own life to save that of the Club members, and then only because of his friendship with the hero Flory. Finally, the effects of disgrace are very different for the British than for the Burmese. Flory's ultimate suicide reflects not so much despair over the damage to his reputation, but rather Flory's dismay about Elizabeth's realization that he is not the kind of man she could marry. And the reason that he is not the kind of man she could marry, the reason that Flory must die in the end, is because of his unease with the colonial project; unlike the others, Flory has an affinity for Burma and its people that makes him a lonely outcast in his own heart, even if he is able to hide this fact from his comrades. Still, were he to go back to the club after the scene in the church and continue to play the part of the colonial loyalist, the worst he might expect would be temporary snubbing and mockery; he would not lose his home or his job.²⁹ For Veraswami, whose position depends on his reputation, the effects of these reputational politics are much more dire.

What Shame: Women and Reputation

“‘When a girl's failed everywhere else she tries India, where every man's pining for the sight of a white woman. The Indian marriage-market, they call it. Meat market it ought to be. Shiploads of 'em coming out every year like carcasses of frozen mutton, to be pawed over by nasty old bachelors like you. Cold storage. Juicy joints straight from the ice.’

He went through a pantomime of examining a joint of meat, with goatish sniffs. This joke was likely to last Ellis a long time; his jokes usually did; and

²⁹Of course, we know from his treatment of his friend Veraswami that Flory would go to great lengths to avoid even a week or two of such snubbing and mockery. Still, this is a result of his own weakness; the reality is that he could, like any British man in this context, regain his reputation. For Veraswami there is no such possibility, and the loss of his reputation means disaster.

there was nothing that gave him quite so keen a pleasure as dragging a woman's name through mud" (*Burmese Days*, 110).

Ellis's above appraisals of Elizabeth Lackersteen's motives in coming to Burma are, if crudely stated, accurate. With no parents and no other means of support, marriage is Elizabeth's most attractive option for survival. The alternative, as her aunt routinely reminds her, is the fate of a young woman sent to Burma for similar reasons who was altogether too choosy: "And now I hear that she's at home, poor thing, working as a kind of lady help, practically, a *servant*. And getting only fifteen shillings a week!" (*Burmese Days*, 99, emphasis in original). When her uncle begins to make persistent and covert sexual advances, Elizabeth's motivation to escape her bad situation through marriage becomes even stronger.

The relationship that Elizabeth and Flory develop is founded on a mutual mistaken recognition that borders on comedy. Elizabeth, "saved" from a harmless water buffalo by Flory during their first meeting, believes that he is the quintessential man of empire, brave, rugged, and ruling over the Burmese with strength and an iron fist. Flory believes, for no other reason than that he desires it, that Elizabeth is the person who can finally understand his love of the Burmese culture and his discomfort with colonialism. His reputation in Elizabeth's eyes—bolstered by his seemingly daring triumph over the docile water buffalo that has Elizabeth cornered—is the same reputation to which he is expected to aspire by the other Europeans. Elizabeth wants the same thing in a husband that the Club members want in a "sahib." When the titled Lieutenant Verrall, the younger son of nobility, arrives in Kyauktada, however, Elizabeth's loyalties are quick to shift. They shift back to Flory just as quickly with Verrall's unannounced departure, which, given the amount of time she has spent alone with Verrall, leaves Elizabeth's own reputation endangered.

Even after Elizabeth slowly comes to recognize that Flory does not fit with her vision of him, and even after she knows about his relationship with Ma Hla May, Elizabeth is perfectly willing to accept him, so long as his newfound renown for his heroism at the Club remains intact. But Ma Hla May's scene in the church is the final straw; Elizabeth refuses Flory shortly after. "It is the ugly scene, the public disgrace, that Elizabeth finds unsupportable, not Flory's sexual relations with a Burmese woman. Not what a man is but what he appears to be is what counts" (Patai 1984, 33). Patai's observation, here, is borne out in Elizabeth's relationship with Verrall who, despite being nobility, is rude and ungentlemanly and, even worse, in massive debt. Still, Orwell's portrayal of Elizabeth as vapid, superficial, and cruel is harsh, especially given the difficult circumstances of her situation. As a person whose own life prospects and reputation depend on the prestige of her husband, Elizabeth's actions are no more reprehensible than Flory's, to whom Orwell is, if not sympathetic, certainly less derogatory.

For Ma Hla May, much like Veraswami and Elizabeth before her, prestige comes only from her attachment to a European man—in this case, Flory. Purchased from her parents, Ma Hla May did not choose her life as Flory's mistress, nor does she love him; she is, in fact, having a secret and more passionate affair with a Burmese man. Yet, Ma Hla May's status as a white man's wife is one that ensures her reputation among the Burmese community, and it is for this reason that she gladly plays the role that has been assigned her. When Flory becomes enamored with Elizabeth and expels Ma Hla May from his home, there is nowhere for her to go. "I am ruined, ruined!" she wails. "What man will marry me after I have lived two years in your house? You have taken my youth from me. Ah, what shame, what shame!" (*Burmese Days*, 154). Ma Hla May, reminiscent in many ways of Rousseau's

ill-fated heroines, is left worse off than when Flory found her. As a woman, she cannot subsist on her own. As a woman with a bad reputation, she cannot expect to find a Burmese man who will marry her. At the end of the novel, we are told, “Ma Hla May is in a brothel in Mandalay. Her good looks are all but gone, and her clients pay her only four annas and sometimes kick her and beat her” (*Burmese Days*, 285). The implication, of course, is that she got what she deserved for her greedy demands on Flory and for helping U Po Kyin with his evil plot.

Despite his lack of sympathy, Orwell’s women find themselves in a position that is just as untenable as Veraswami’s; for him, attachment to a European provided the only possibility of maintaining his reputation, even given his true dedication to and support of the colonial project. Similarly, Elizabeth’s prestige comes not from her own actions or inactions, with the possible exception of maintaining sexual respectability, but rather from her attachment to a man. The same is true for Ma Hla May, whose name is good so long as she cohabits with Flory, but who is untouchable as his cast-off. The similarity between the situations of the two women and Veraswami is no accident. As Daphne Patai (1984) argues, the logic of imperialism was in many ways an extension of masculine paternalism, the object of which simply shifted from women to natives. “A whole series of characteristics were thus attributed to the Indians, all of which stress their similarity to children and women as traditionally perceived: lacking in self-discipline, governed by emotion rather than reason, untrustworthy, senselessly cruel, tending toward hysteria” (Patai 1984, 24-25). Interestingly, the natives in *Burmese Days* are also portrayed as, like women or children, having petty and mysterious quarrels that the British are better off ignoring. As Patai points out, Orwell

himself remarks in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, “I felt towards a Burman almost as I felt towards a woman” (124).

Like the Crocodile: Gossip and the Possibility of Agency

Several of the events in *Burmese Days* point to the possibility that gossip and reputational politics may provide a measure of power to those who are relatively powerless: U Po Kyin successfully employs gossip to plant suspicion among the Europeans about Veraswami and he is able to channel Ma Hla May’s relationship with Flory into a scene that decimates the man. Though Ma Hla May does not think to use this power herself, she still possesses the ability to quite handily destroy one of Flory’s most precious assets—his reputation. Even Mrs. Lackersteen is able to deploy gossip in such a way that enables her to control the activities of Elizabeth. For these otherwise relatively powerless characters, it seems, gossip and the deployment of reputational politics provides the ability to direct events in a way that might not be possible otherwise. Yet, this power is one that can easily be overstated; none of these characters is able to achieve any sort of liberation from their overall circumstances, and all remain in a position of relative powerlessness.

On the one hand, it’s possible to think of the machinations of U Po Kyin as remarkably ingenious. As a political tool, it is clear, ruining the reputations of others has worked for him before. He strikes “like the crocodile...always at the weakest spot” (*Burmese Days*, 49). The gossipy details about Veraswami that he manufactures give him a measure of power over his situation that Veraswami himself lacks; U Po Kyin is ultimately elected to the club and, not long after, promoted to Deputy Commissioner. Masterminding Ma Hla May’s confrontation at the church, U Po Kyin accomplishes the seemingly impossible: ruining the reputation of a European. Still, U Po Kyin’s success is limited and individualized; even as

they help him to navigate and maneuver his circumscribed imperial environment, the potential of his methods to give him any real power within this colonial context is seriously questionable.

The same is true for Mrs. Lackersteen, Elizabeth's aunt. Often using gossip to manipulate situations, Mrs. Lackersteen is the one who furnishes Elizabeth's excuse for dropping Flory when Verrall arrives in town: "Of course you know, Elizabeth dear, that Flory is keeping a Burmese woman?" she quietly asks her niece (*Burmese Days*, 196). Elizabeth has been in Kyauktada for many weeks when Mrs. Lackersteen finally furnishes this juicy tidbit which, until it suited her purposes, she took pains to keep from Elizabeth. Mrs. Lackersteen also uses gossip to ensure Elizabeth's commitment to find a husband, relaying to her the story of the young lady whose lack of success in the Burmese marriage market led to being sent back to England as a lowly servant. Here again, Mrs. Lackersteen is able to subtly exert control in an effort to achieve her desired ends, but she remains relatively powerless outside of these domestic confines, excluded from decision-making power at the club, not to mention the wider political environment.

Ma Hla May, whose scene at the church is the death blow to Flory and Veraswami, is nothing more than a pawn in Orwell's story, and she is ultimately punished for exacting her revenge. Of all of the novel's characters, it is she who may appear to hold some measure of real power, the potential to ruin the man who ruined her, yet she is painted by Orwell as much too stupid or naive to realize it. Approaching Flory outside the Club one evening after his dismissal, she shrieks "Give me the money" (*Burmese Days*, 197). Flory hushes her, "Be quiet! They'll hear you in the Club!" and is "instantly sorry for putting the idea into her head" (*Burmese Days*, 197). It is only when Flory expresses his horror at the possibility of

creating a scene that she considers herself a threat to Flory, though she fails to follow through on this information until U Po Kyin pays her to do so. One could imagine that, were she craftier, Ma Hla May could have marginally improved her situation and eventual fate considerably by more surreptitiously taking advantage of the threat she posed to Flory's reputation. One could also imagine the damage that might be done by the many other Burmese women with whom Flory and his fellow Englishmen have had sexual relationships. The threat of ruining their lovers' reputations provides them with a bargaining tool that a man such as Flory might take quite seriously. Still, the power held by these women is one that, when actually deployed, verges on suicidal; in destroying the reputations of the men to whom they are attached, women in Ma Hla May's situation ruin themselves, as well. Whatever small measure of power the *threat* of exposure might give these women over the men who have used them, the reality of exposure is a kamikaze move that leads to desirable consequences for no one.

Thus, *Burmese Days* hints at the possibilities that gossip and other forms of reputational manipulation provide for maneuvering in a context of radical social and political inequality. While these possibilities are limited, they do provide some small measure of power that, when deployed correctly, might make existence within this context more manageable for people who are relatively powerless. The challenge is to develop a more thoroughgoing understanding of whether this power might be deployed in such a way as to both minimize harm to one's peers (Dr. Veraswami) and to afford more lasting liberatory potential.

Conclusion

What Orwell's construction of reputational politics in *Burmese Days* ultimately suggests is that, far from being relatively innocuous if effective methods of overall social control, reputation and gossip work cyclically as both constituents and effects of imbalances in power. If Rousseau and the other early modern theorists of reputation are correct and people are in fact motivated by their innate desire for reputation, then the architecture of power in *Burmese Days* is masterful. Conferring prestige only upon those who are as European or as close to Europeans as possible, this system reinforces power by encouraging in the Burmese not the qualities required for self-government or self-determination, but rather adherence to the very structure of power that maintains their subordination. Mill's argument that some people have a greater ability than others to withstand reputational harm is also borne out quite poignantly in Orwell's Burma. While I have argued that the British men are free from worry about their personal activities doing harm to their reputations—so long as those activities do not serve to undermine colonial power—it is also the case that they are able to survive damage to their reputations in a way that the Burmese men and women of any nationality are not. For people such as Veraswami, for example, the smallest hint of impropriety can mean a loss of livelihood; his freedom is severely limited by the necessity of maintaining his reputation. Both of these points in many way echo the critique that Wollstonecraft makes of Rousseau: requiring bowing and scraping, unquestioning obedience, and the constant appearance of loyalty, this reputational structure in fact works to rob the colonized of both the time and capacities needed to gain their freedom.

Orwell's argument in "Shooting an Elephant" about the relative powerlessness of the British and their servitude to the people they are ruling is eerily similar, though not identical,

to Rousseau's assertions about the power that women hold in his conception of good government. But as Daphne Patai (1984) notes in her feminist criticism of *Burmese Days* and "Shooting an Elephant," none of the British in the former nor Orwell himself in the latter are ultimately individually responsible for the power of the empire. Their power, she argues, comes not from the Burmese opinions of them as individuals, but rather from the institution that they represent. Had Orwell failed to shoot the elephant, had he been laughed at or been branded a fool, the British empire would not have toppled as a result. The only damage sustained would have been to his pride. Further, all that the empire requires is that British citizens in colonial India behave in such a way that reinforces their own power *in public*. The more private and moral functions that Rousseau sees for gossip and other forms of reputational policing do not apply to those in positions of power. Rather, reputation is used as a way in which to keep subordinates in line, to ensure their loyalty to and dependence on the powerful.

Further, while there are certainly important differences between colonial racism and paternalism, the logic of reputational politics within both relationships of power in *Burmese Days* seems markedly similar. Also similar is the reputational status of Orwell's Burmese and Rousseau's women: the double standards to which both groups are subjected, their inability to rebuild their sullied reputations, the incommensurately dire effects of losing their reputations, and the lax standards of truth upon which they can easily be ruined. What these similarities suggest is that the observations Orwell makes in *Burmese Days* about the workings of reputation extend beyond the particular context of colonial Burma to include other types of power relationships. If reputation can, as I have argued, work so well as a tool of domination, then there is not only more to Rousseau's position about the power of

reputation in democratic politics, but there is also considerably more to be skeptical about in his imperative that women must maintain their sexual reputations.

CHAPTER 5

“THANK GOD FOR PUBLIC OPINION”: GOSSIP, REPUTATION, AND THE CLINTON/LEWINSKY SCANDAL

“Thank God for public opinion!” (Bill Clinton after being acquitted by the Senate, as reported by Woodward 1999, 513).

Public opinion, as many have noted, was ultimately Bill Clinton’s savior, helping to ensure that his impeachment trial ended with acquittal. In this chapter, my goal is to focus on a particular kind of public opinion—reputation—and the conversation that fuels it—gossip. As one of the largest sex scandals in our nation’s history, the affair between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, Kenneth Starr’s investigation, and the president’s impeachment certainly provided some of the most sensational and talked-about political events ever. Inspired by and fueling gossip on a national scale, the scandal was also one of the most far-reaching when it came to reputational politics, involving not only the president and many of his staff members, but also a White House intern and a Pentagon worker. It is difficult *not* to consider this scandal in a project about gossip and reputation.

I begin my discussion by considering the political science work that has been done on the scandal before moving on to examine the broader literature that the affair has inspired. Next, I posit my specific reasons for choosing the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal as a case study for my project, arguing that the content, the people involved, and the scandal’s widespread and highly publicized nature provide the quintessential avenue for investigating gossip and reputation. Examining arguments that suggest that scandal politics in general, and this scandal in particular, is damaging to democratic politics, I attempt to show how the gossip

inspired by the scandal might be more important than both critics and theorists such as Wollstonecraft have argued. I then look at the differential effects of the scandal on the reputation of Clinton himself, as well as some of the women involved, arguing that they are gendered in a way that does, in fact, resemble the observations made by Wollstonecraft and the Mills. Finally, I end the chapter by using the scandal to consider the ways in which reputation may not be as monolithic, and its consequences not quite as dire, as the fate of Rousseau's and Orwell's characters might suggest.

Political Science, Pundits, and the Clinton Imbroglio

During and in the aftermath of the Lewinsky scandal, political scientists struggled to learn what lessons they could from what has been called “the most avidly followed and consequential political sex scandal in this country’s history” (Apostolidis and Williams 2004, 3). The largest puzzle they faced, and the source of much of the political science work on the scandal, was the seemingly incomprehensible direction that public opinion took during the thirteen months from the breaking of the story through the end of the impeachment trial: “President Bill Clinton was, paradoxically, the most publicly shamed president of modern time and one of the most popular” (Sonner and Wilcox 1999, 554). In addition to this body of work on public opinion, however, other political scientists, legal scholars, and cultural theorists have investigated myriad issues surrounding the scandal, its participants, and its aftermath. In this section, I provide a brief reconstruction of public opinion during the affair, a review of several of the explanations for these citizen reactions, and a discussion of some of the other work on the scandal that is not focused on this question of public opinion.

When the scandal first broke in January, 1998, polls showed an almost instant decrease in Clinton’s job approval rating, which dropped from 60% to 51%, according to one

ABC News/*Washington Post* poll (Sonner and Wilcox 1999). The public's assessment of Clinton as a person faltered, as well. In a Gallup poll taken in February 1997, 49% of respondents said that the phrase "honest and trustworthy" applied to the president; by January 1998, only 33% responded similarly (Sonner and Wilcox 1999). Polls conducted by various news and research organizations throughout 1998 suggested that about two-thirds of Americans believed that Clinton had lied about the affair, yet, after the initial drop, Clinton's job approval rating continued to rise, approaching 70% by the end of the year (Miller 1999). As new details emerged throughout the scandal, more and more Americans came to believe that Clinton was guilty, and fewer and fewer believed that he ought to be removed from office (Sonner and Wilcox 1999). In fact, "through the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, about two-thirds of Americans told pollsters that they thought their president dishonest and untrustworthy at the same time two-thirds of Americans said they approved of his job performance" (Beschloss 1999, xi). By the time of his Senate impeachment trial in February, 1999, fewer than 35% of those polled believed that the trial should end in Clinton's conviction (Sonner and Wilcox 1999).

The central conundrum of the scandal for political scientists, then, was ultimately about reputation—why citizen assessments of Clinton turned out as they did. Asking why so many Americans were convinced of Clinton's guilt yet still remained pleased with his performance as president, public opinion scholars have come, as one might guess, to a variety of conclusions. John Zaller, the first to weigh in on the issue in 1998, before the scandal had even reached its conclusion, optimistically argues that these peculiar trends in public opinion demonstrated "the importance of political substance, as against media hype, in American politics" (Zaller 1998, 182). Others disagree, suggesting that the poll results

reflected citizens' sophistication in separating private behavior from public concerns (Miller 1999, see also Barber 2001). Molly Sonner and Clyde Wilcox posit that the strength of the economy, Clinton's charisma and popular positions on many contemporary issues, and public dislike and distrust for Clinton's perceived enemies and their motives were to account for the widespread support he received (Sonner and Wilcox 1999). Citing poll results that suggested that few Americans—roughly one-third—actually followed the scandal closely, Stephen Bennett argues that this relative inattention to the scandal could provide at least partial explanation for Clinton's high job approval (Bennett 2002).³⁰ Dhavan Shah, Mark Watts, David Domke, and David Fan turn to the news coverage of the scandal for explanation, arguing that the way in which the media framed the scandal or emphasized other issues accounted for citizen response (Shah et al. 2002). Ultimately, they suggest that media reports that framed the scandal as a conservative attack had more to do with Clinton's approval than any focus by the media on, for example, the strong economy. Mark Joslyn also makes an argument about the strength of media frames to people's evaluation of the scandal, pointing out that his subjects report that they are less influenced by frames that focus on sexual or partisan cues than by those that center on legal and ethical issues (Joslyn 2003).³¹

In addition to this work on public opinion, an interesting array of political scientists, legal scholars, journalists, feminists, public intellectuals, and others have weighed in on the imbroglio. Some writers have focused on the scandal as the culmination of a lengthy right-wing campaign to destroy Clinton (see Conason and Lyons 2000 and Toobin 1999), while others have both attacked and defended Kenneth Starr's considerable role in the events (see

³⁰Interestingly, Brody (1998), argued earlier that the public in fact paid quite a bit of attention to the scandal, referring to Gallup polls that suggested that 80% followed the story "very" or "somewhat" closely.

³¹James Kincaid also makes the somewhat tongue-in-cheek suggestion that the public did not care about Clinton's behavior because Kenneth Starr "is himself so sneakily lascivious that he sucks up the entire national supply" (2001, 79).

Dershowitz 1998, Malti-Douglas 2000, Schmidt and Weisskopf 2000, and Wittes 2002). Richard Posner (1999) examines the legal aspects of Clinton's investigation and impeachment, Joseph Blaney and William Benoit (2001) focus on the Clinton camp's work with image restoration, and Marvin Kalb (2001) investigates the role of journalists in the scandal. Peter Merkl (2001) provides an account of Europe's reaction to the affair and Stanley Renshon (2000) uses Clinton's behavior during the scandal to think about presidential psychology. Benjamin Barber (2001) includes a discussion of the affair in a memoir of his personal interactions with Clinton. A detailed reconstruction of the investigation and ensuing scandal is provided by Peter Baker (2000). In more traditional scholarly volumes, scores of thinkers consider the institutional aspects of the scandal, the aftermath that it has wrought, the class- and race-based facets of the affair, and its impact on the future of American government, morality, and religion (see Berlant and Duggan 2001, Kaplan and Moran 2001, and Rozell and Wilcox 2000). Even "Showgirls" and "Basic Instinct" screenwriter Joe Eszterhas (2000) got in on the action with an irreverent discussion of the events that includes, among other things, a talking version of Bill Clinton's penis. There are also, of course, the biographies and autobiographies of the major players in the scandal: Andrew Morton's *Monica's Story* (1999) is a detailed account of the affair and investigation from Lewinsky's point of view. While Bill (2004) and Hillary (2003) Clinton's autobiographies are more circumspect and discreet, they, too, both speak to the scandal and its surrounding events.

Feminist scholars, in particular, have had much to say about the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal. Some have focused on the fact that the affair between the president and the intern happened almost exclusively in the workplace; they often disagree about the extent to which

this fact assists in or complicates the wider feminist agenda of encouraging workplaces and the courts to take sexual harassment seriously (see Fraiman 1999, Gallop and Berlant 2001, Lumby 2001, and Smith 2004). Others question feminist supporters of Clinton and the way that feminists responded to the scandal at the time, arguing that Clinton's reputation as a pro-woman president was misleading or that he didn't do enough for women to make up for the harm his affair with Lewinsky caused them (see Mink 1999, Rapaport 2001). Juliet Williams (2001, 2004) defends and clarifies the feminist commitment to the personal as political in light of Clinton's investigation and impeachment, and Jean Bethke Elshtain (2001), too, interrogates the notion of public and private in relation to the affair. Finally, feminist scholars have used the scandal as an avenue to think about other issues of interest to feminists, such as social responses to women's physical appearances (see Kipnis 2001), media and cultural representations of Jewish women (see Garber 2001), and sex and secrecy (see Willis 2001).

While I will revisit many of these arguments in greater detail later, it is important to note the wide breadth of work that the Lewinsky scandal fostered; the fact that so many scholars and public intellectuals have thought and written about the scandal, and that they continue to do so, suggests both its strong effects on political life in the United States and its continued relevance. In the next section, I move on to my own study of the scandal with a discussion of the way in which gossip and reputation were central to the events of 1998. My analysis is one that takes into account not only the content of the scandal itself, but that also takes seriously its origins in gossip, as well as the massive amounts of gossip that kept the story alive and the truly remarkable amount of gossip that it fueled. Further, I suggest that public response to the scandal and the consequences for the reputations of those involved has

much to say about the facets of reputation the chapters of this dissertation have explored: its effect on our political community, its connection with gender, its consequences for individuals, as well as its overall place in American political life.

Electing Clinton and Lewinsky: Why this Scandal?

As arguably the largest, longest-running, and most-watched scandal since Watergate, the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal is one that not only captured the attention of the nation, but that has also become paradigmatic of political and sex scandals worldwide. While controversy exists in the polling literature about how many people were actually paying close attention, Toby Miller points out that “U.S. TV devoted more airtime to Clinton’s scandal in 1998 than all other news stories put together” (2001, 123). And Peter Merkl argues that the European community was watching, as well, calling the scandal “a political soap opera that no foreign newspaper could pass by” (2001,8). Ultimately, the news coverage of the scandal made it all but impossible not to pay attention: “Given the story’s structure, the saturation news, and the endless repetition, one could in fact follow it closely *without consciously following it closely*” (Varon 2004, 244, emphasis in original).

In addition to its prominence and inescapability, however, the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal also encompasses myriad facets that make it an ideal case study for my purposes. More than merely political, and more than merely sexual, the scandal lies at the intersection of these (highly contested) borders. It is not just about the affair of a married man; it is about the affair of our president, an affair that unfolded in what many consider the publicly owned space of the White House. It is not just about a man lying about sex; it about our president lying about sex under oath.³² Finally, it is not just a story of presidential impeachment, but a

³²Some commentators have suggested that the Clinton scandal was never really about sex at all, it was only about lying. I agree with those who argue that the scandal was, in fact, about sex. They have pointed out that

story of what many have called a politically motivated intrusion into the private lives of not only Clinton, but also countless others involved in the case. In its complexity, the Clinton-Lewinsky imbroglio does more than just muddy the waters between public and private. Also implicit in the scandal are many of the concerns that have driven my work: questions about relationships of power, the role of gender in reputational politics, the place of sexuality in policing reputations, and the importance, value, and impact of both reputation and gossip for democratic communities more generally. I'd like to focus, for a moment, on the role of gossip in the scandal; while little of the communication that surrounded the affair was typical gossip, or "casual talk about the personal lives of other people," I still want to suggest that much of this communication still qualifies as gossip.

Anyone who followed the scandal even marginally knows that it was Monica Lewinsky's friend Linda Tripp who first brought the affair to the attention of both the press and Kenneth Starr's investigative team.³³ With details gathered from her conversations with Lewinsky, Tripp began sharing news of the affair with both Lucianne Goldberg, a literary agent, and Michael Isikoff, a Newsweek reporter. Tripp had also been friends with Kathleen Willey, whose allegations of sexual harassment by the president were the subject of Isikoff's research; Tripp's first communications with Isikoff were centered around Kathleen Willey's case. The information that Tripp shared about both Willey and Lewinsky, I'd like to argue, was gossip, in that it was, in fact, conversation about the personal lives of other people.

"if this case were only about lying and not about sex, it would be hard to explain the political pressure that led Representative Robert Livingston to resign from the House and from his position as Speaker-elect when his own extramarital affairs were revealed" (Jakobsen 2001, 297). Livingston was never accused of lying about these affairs, at least not publicly; his "resignation makes clear that the political environment created by the Clinton impeachment was fundamentally and irrevocably about sex" (Jakobsen 2001, 297). For more on this point, see Clarke 2001 and Gallop and Berlant 2001.

³³Michael Isikoff, the Newsweek reporter who Tripp told about the affair, was nonetheless not the first to break the story. It is unclear who tipped off the author of *The Drudge Report*, though I'm certain this would qualify as gossip, as well!

Admittedly, most would consider Linda Tripp's brand of gossip less than casual—her motives remain contested to this day—and, as such, it was not the typical, everyday form of gossip that I identify in my introduction. Yet, the personal nature of the information she was sharing about her friends brands her discussions with Goldberg and Isikoff as gossip nonetheless.

The type of communication that occurred around the scandal once it was made public was both complex and diverse. The story broke, famously, in *The Drudge Report*, “a gossipy Internet site run by a thirty-year-old out of his Los Angeles home” (Lumby 2001, 230). Media coverage of all types soon followed, along with Kenneth Starr's report, which was published first on the internet and, eventually, as a book. Pundits discussed the affair amongst themselves on television, teachers and students discussed it in classrooms, and people of all ages discussed it in all manner of spaces. All of these news stories, official reports, and conversations, by the very nature of the private sexual affair around which they centered, must be considered gossip, as well. Some of these examples do qualify as typical gossip. A discussion about the affair in the corner pub, for example, fits my definition perfectly: “Did you hear about the cigar?” Others, such as media reports and newspaper stories, are less typical, though they remain on my gossip continuum. “When it comes to discussion of sexual impropriety, gossip is the prevailing lingua franca,” Paul Apostolidis and Juliet Williams point out, “regardless of whether the conversational venue is the proverbial water cooler or the national media” (2004, 5). Even the Starr Report, itself, in all its official glory, I'd like to argue, is “a text that can be read as gossip,” by virtue of the details it relates about the sexual affair between Clinton and Lewinsky, it can't be anything but (Cvetkovich 2001, 280).

What this means is that, in addition to being one of the largest scandals in our nation's history, the Clinton/Lewinsky affair is also squarely in the center of what is certainly one of the most gossiped-about events ever. And, while reputations are built and destroyed in the course of normal events every day, the effect of all of this gossip on the reputations of those involved in the scandal was both more sensational and more far-reaching than anything that can be accomplished solely around Apostolidis and Williams' "proverbial water cooler." For people as peripheral to the events as Monica Lewinsky's kid brother to people as central as Lewinsky herself, reputation certainly became, at the hands of all of this gossip, one of the most fragile commodities. Further, given the wide range of people involved in the scandal—from a Pentagon worker to a White House intern to an independent prosecutor to the president himself—as well as their range of characteristics—age, race, religion, and gender—the scandal and its consequences provide what is ultimately a fascinating and complex window onto reputation in the United States.

In the next section, I begin my discussion of the scandal itself by briefly reviewing the arguments of Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, and the Mills. I move on to consider Wollstonecraft and the Mills' claims about the vapidness of gossip and reputational pursuits through an examination of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal. Though the work of all of these thinkers took place in a different century and on a different continent than the scandal, many of the theoretical points that they make remain helpful to thinking about the imbroglio. Further, while some have argued that sex scandals and the gossip they inspire detract attention from issues that are actually of importance to political life, I use the scandal to think about the ways in which gossip might actually serve as important in itself, ultimately rejecting the wholesale dismissal of gossip as trivial and unhelpful to politics.

Gossip as Politically Bankrupt?: The Scandal and our Political Community

For Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the other proponents of early modern reputational discourse, deploying reputation in a way that encourages public virtue is central to the creation of a successful political community. This means, in Rousseau's schema, publicly holding up as objects of esteem those who embody civic virtue, who display courage, vigor, and commitment to the public good; he does not, however, suggest that sexuality ought to become part of these public displays of virtue, especially not for men. Still, the use of gossip and reputation to police the sexual behavior of women in particular is central to his political vision. Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, and John Stuart Mill all argue that this focus on women's sexuality is one that provides the basis for women's subordination, robbing them of the talents and skills required for democratic citizenship and rendering them shallow and vapid. In constantly worrying about their own sexual reputations, as well as the sexual reputations of others, then, women lose their capacities for political participation, not only because their behavior becomes so circumscribed, but also because their interests are so narrow. According to Wollstonecraft, especially, focusing on the personal, and in particular sexual, behavior of others, women are left with little time or ability to focus on larger political issues. This argument reflects what might be seen, on the one hand, as an unsettling denigration of those personal and sexual issues. On the other hand, it also reflects a genuine concern with women's exclusion from public life.

The Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal affords the opportunity to think about gossip and sexual reputation more generally, beyond Rousseau's gendered vision in which men's reputations are based on public, political activities and women's reputations are based on their sexuality. It allows us to move beyond the idea that women gossip and men do not

to consider the way in which, during the scandal, everyone gossiped. And while our evaluations of Clinton's behavior certainly varied in a way that Rousseau would not prescribe for his women, the fact remains that, with very few exceptions, for better or for worse, we all talked about it.³⁴ In a way and for a moment, one might observe, we became a nation of Rousseau's women. The questions that are spurred by this observation are reflections of those that might surround Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau: What effect did the national obsession with Clinton's sex life have on "true" political engagement? Did the focus on sexual scandal wither our civic capacities? What good, if any, came from all of that gossip? While these questions suggest that the national obsession with the scandal was one that actually led us away from politics, I will argue quite the opposite, positing that the scandal and the gossip that surrounded it were in many ways the basis of a great deal of political engagement.

Several thinkers have suggested that the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal and the public engagement with it have been detrimental to the activities that might constitute more effective political participation. Apostolidis and Williams call the scandal a hallmark not only of "the death of privacy" but also of "the withering of publicity, in the sense of a vibrant public sphere" (2004, 14). In focusing on the scandal, they argue, the media abandoned its "public-oriented features and functions" for a private interest in making a profit (Apostolidis and Williams 2004, 13). Alone, Apostolidis goes even further to suggest that the ideology surrounding the scandal "has proven capable of legitimating power during the present era as democratic, when democratic accountability is actually declining" in issues such as campaign finance and the legislative operations of Congress, for example

³⁴"It felt imperative to have an opinion," two commentators remember (Berlant and Duggan 2001, 2).

(Apostolidis 2004, 155). Theodore Lowi brands engagement with the scandal a “suboptimizing, pathological form of political participation” (2004, 89).

In a more sustained argument about the damage they believe the scandal has done to American politics, Dana Nelson and Tyler Curtain argue that engagement with the scandal served to teach U.S. citizens “to substitute the aims of political change with debates over policing someone else’s morality” (2001, 34). Nelson and Curtain make two related points about the problems presented for our democracy by the scandal. First, they suggest, the focus on the “constitutional crisis” of the impeachment proceedings stole attention away from the true representational crisis that the scandal evoked—“the moment that congressional leaders invoked the principles of virtual representation even as their constituents insisted on actual representation” (Nelson and Curtain 2001, 34-35). While a strong contingent of the United States citizenry was against impeachment, they point out, a truly staggering number of members of the House all but ignored this fact in their votes to impeach. Further, they argue, the scandal reinforced the notion of presidentialism, the idea that it’s the responsibility of the president, not the citizens, to manage our democracy; real democracy, rather, “happens when people have, and take responsibility for, self-governing leadership” (Nelson and Curtain 2001, 36). Instead of encouraging such self-governing leadership, Nelson and Curtain insist, “the so-called crisis,” the scandal itself and the ensuing impeachment debate, “encouraged us to accept that democratic participation culminates in our own personal opinion about the president’s personal sexual habits” (2001, 36).

While I do take quite seriously Nelson and Curtain’s points about the way in which the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal diverted attention from what might be considered larger problems with our democracy, I don’t think that their passing recognition of the important

national conversations brought up by the scandal, which they understate as only “discussions of family, monogamy, adultery, and the possibility and process of marital forgiveness” take adequately seriously the incredibly large range of deliberation that the scandal provoked (2001, 37). Whenever national discussion is drawn to rumors of scandal or to gossip about governmental officials, there is always a cadre of pundits and politicians quick to admonish that the time might be better spent discussing the issues rather than gossiping about the tawdry details of, to take our example, the president’s sex life. What these pundits and politicians fail to notice is the same thing that political theorists, including Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, and the Mills, have tended to ignore: gossip *can be* about important issues and can serve other important political functions. Serving as a site of public deliberation, gossip can often provide a venue for national debate.

Gail Collins points out that gossip in each era tends to reflect issues salient to particular problems and events of the time:

“The gossips of the pre-Civil War period would not have obsessed about politicians with black mistresses, whether real or imaginary, if the problem of slavery had not been reverberating everywhere. Public consciousness of the fight for women’s rights expressed itself in a raft of rumors about wife-beating presidents. When the sexual revolution arrived after World War I, so did gossip about syphilitic politicians” (1999, 19-20).

In reflecting issues of widespread public concern, however, gossip can also provide a place to talk about them. Some of the gossip about politicians’ black mistresses was deliberation about race; rumors of wife-beating presidents helped to allow discussion followed by changing consensus on the appropriateness of husbands abusing their wives; and gossip about syphilitic politicians was, in part, discussion about the effects of looser sexual norms.

In the case of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal in particular, the gossip that surrounded the story provided the space for public deliberation about an extraordinarily wide range of

issues. Opening up a national conversation about sex in the workplace, the affair between Clinton and Lewinsky got more than just feminists talking about the difference between consensual sexual relations and ones that are coerced.³⁵ Discussions of the propriety of workplace romances in general, and of such romances between a superior and an underling in particular, as well as conversations about the acceptable use of public space were just the beginning: journalists and others were forced by the scandal to consider journalistic norms and ethics; feminists were spurred to ask whether the Clinton administration, in the light of the scandal, had been good for women, prompting a reevaluation of his policies; people of all persuasions considered issues of marital fidelity and, given Hillary Clinton's decision to remain with her husband, whether she ought to forgive him and whether or not they would do the same. As a nation, we struggled over the definition of sexual relations and began a public dialogue about sex the likes of which remains unmatched. Then there were debates about the symbolic importance of the first family, the desirability of having independent counsel investigate the president, the wisdom of allowing a sitting president to be sued, the dirtiness of partisan politics, and the dangers of the impeachment process more generally. Considering the relationship between Monica Lewinsky and Linda Tripp, people talked about women's friendships and asked each other what *they* would have done in Tripp's shoes. They wondered, watching Lewinsky's mother Marcia Lewis walking out of the courthouse, distraught, if parents should be forced to testify against their children. The list really is endless. And while I do not mean to suggest that all people discussed all of these issues, that consensus was always reached, and that, when it was, I agreed with it or considered it good for the national community, I do want to argue that these are topics that are both vital to the

³⁵As I noted earlier, some feminists have argued that this discussion could have been more helpful and nuanced given greater or different feminist participation. The fact remains that conversations about sex in the workplace were an upshot of the scandal.

fabric of our communal life and that might have remained undiscussed were it not for gossip about the “trivial” details of the president’s sex life.

Most commentators on the scandal do agree that the largest debate to result from it was the one over the distinction between public and private. As two thinkers note, sex scandals, especially the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, are “symptomatic of contestation over where to draw the line between public and private with regard to sex, and insofar as they bring such contestation to light, they inherently deconstruct the notion of the public/private distinction as a universal truth that is simply given to the rational mind” (Apostolidis and Williams 2004, 10). For whatever reason among those that have been suggested, be it political sophistication, attention to the issues instead of media buzz, a selfish satisfaction with the state of the economy, or even identification with the libidos, lies, and humiliation of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, a majority quickly decided that private sexual behavior was not grounds for removing the president from public office. Contrary to Nelson and Curtain’s claim of representational crisis, then, the nation’s representatives were, ultimately, quite responsive; the end result of the scandal’s impeachment process was one of which the majority of the public approved.

My point, here, is not that I believe that politics ought to be conducted through sex scandals, or even that I don’t agree with Nelson and Curtain that such scandals have the capability of distracting citizen attention away from issues of great importance. Rather, I am simply suggesting that dismissing the gossip upon which sex scandals are predicated and that they inspire as trivial or merely salacious ignores the extent to which such gossip does provide a vehicle for the discussion of issues that are also of great importance. This is true not only in the broad national arena and in scandals as widespread as the Clinton/Lewinsky

affair, but also, even more importantly, in the smaller, more localized and even personal little scandals that happen every day. Thus, while I agree with Wollstonecraft and the Mills that women ought not to be relegated to a domain in which gossip and reputation is their main pursuit and governor, I take issue with the denigration of gossip that a wholesale rejection of it as worthwhile entails.

I move, next, to a discussion of the class and gender distinctions that work to complicate reputational politics. Turning to some thinkers who have made compelling arguments about the reasons for Clinton's vulnerability, I argue that his reputation was not quite as susceptible to destruction as those of the women involved in the scandal. Though the president was publicly humiliated by his sexual behavior, the discourse that surrounded the scandal treated his reputation much differently than that of the women involved. True to form, then, and perhaps surprisingly given the very different historical circumstances, in respect to gender reputation played out in the scandal much as the other thinkers I've interrogated have suggested.

Gossip, Reputation, and Power in The Clinton/Lewinsky Scandal

For many years, the sex lives of American presidents faded into the shadows behind their public behavior. While maintaining an appearance of "marital respectability" was certainly required, Ellen Willis notes, the reality of the president's actual sexual behavior could in fact be quite different; a number of our past presidents, she points out, have engaged in adultery or other socially stigmatized sexual activities (Willis 2001, 239). The Clinton scandal, she argues, signaled "the end of the trade-off that allowed politicians, in return for outward conformity, to lead a secret sexual life on the side" (Willis 2001, 239). The reasons for the end of this trade-off are unclear; while some have suggested that a cultural shift, such

as changing attitudes about sexual morality, made the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal possible, others have argued that it had more to do with Bill Clinton's outsider status.

In her October 1998 *New Yorker* piece "Talk of the Town," Toni Morrison famously called Clinton America's first black president. Citing his single-parent upbringing, his poverty, his saxophone, and even his penchant for McDonald's, Morrison suggested that Clinton "displays almost every trope of blackness" (1998, 31). As George Shulman notes, this is intimately related to Clinton's sexuality: the right "does not call Clinton a 'black' president directly, but the language of sin and immorality, linked to sexual appetite, promiscuity, and loss of self-control, bespeak the racial meanings that Morrison named as such" (2004, 173). Others have suggested that Clinton is, in fact, the United States' "first 'white trash' president, insofar as all of the attributes of his 'blackness' apply also to stereotypical views of poor southern whites and map more precisely onto Clinton" (Varon 2004, 249, see also McElya 2001). This, too, Juliet Williams argues, is related to the focus on his sexuality, for "in a country notoriously squeamish about talk of social class, it was far easier for Clinton's foes to indict him for philandering than to mock his lowly origins directly" (2004, 218).

While an argument about whether or not the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal was the result, as many have argued, of an actual vast right-wing conspiracy to destroy the president is beyond the scope of this project, it is interesting, nonetheless, to consider the ways in which Clinton's class background may have influenced his susceptibility to a scandal based on his sex life. At any rate, I am persuaded by Willis's assertion that "Clinton put his faith in a protective culture of secrecy that was designed for the JFKs, not for the likes of him; a culture that in any case was dying (though it had protected George Bush and might still have

closed ranks around a president deemed to be One of Us)” (2001, 244). Still, when it came to the scandal, Clinton’s relative position of power was evident in several respects. Whatever the damage to his legacy—something that commentators are still struggling to identify—Clinton’s reputation, as one might guess, fared somewhat better than those of some of the other key players. And while Clinton was certainly exposed and humiliated by the publicly-released details of his sexual encounters with Lewinsky, he was not the one forced to repeat those details time and time again to rooms full of onlookers.

For the women involved in the Clinton scandal, the stakes were, not surprisingly, much different. Though I will argue in the next section that the reputations of many of the people involved in the scandal remain less than fixed or universal, I do want to suggest that, as we have seen in Rousseau’s arguments about women and Wollstonecraft’s critique, as well as in Mill’s point about the differential power of reputation, women’s reputational status is much more fragile than that of their male counterparts. Most critics agree that Hillary Clinton’s reputation fared the best; her willingness to conform to feminine norms, to “stand by her man,” helped to soften her former image as hyper-masculine and domineering. Monica Lewinsky inspired a variety of reactions from the public, resulting in, as I will argue later, a less than monolithic reputation; still, much of the commentary focused on her appearance, her fluctuating weight and her unfortunate choice of headwear. No matter what one’s ultimate opinion of Lewinsky is, it is hard not to remember her as the chubby girl in a beret who all but stalked the president. Paula Jones received similar treatment, as jokes swirled about her big hair and her big nose. Arguably the most hated characters involved in the story, Linda Tripp and Kenneth Starr, too, fared much differently. While Starr was lambasted from many angles for his behavior—his dogged pursuit of Clinton—Tripp, like

the other women involved, was forced to withstand an extraordinary amount of scrutiny based on her appearance. She, in particular, bore the brunt of becoming a pervasive national joke as her perceived ugliness spawned a virtual laundry list of one-liners.³⁶

These women, Jones and Tripp especially, possessed information about the president's behavior, much like the information that Ma Hla May held about Flory, that might have made them powerful. But, "they forgot that exposure is a two-way street" (Kipnis 2001, 70). Ultimately, the information they had did, in fact, embarrass Bill Clinton (and, according to some, cause a "constitutional crisis"), but it was able to do little more than that. The price they paid in their own humiliation, many would argue, left them much worse off than he is. And, as I mentioned earlier, it was Lewinsky, not Clinton, who was forced to endure the supreme embarrassment of describing each excruciating detail of the affair for an entire audience; it was her private thoughts, letters, and telephone conversations that were revealed, and not, for the most part, Clinton's. On the one hand, as Apostolidis and Williams point out, it has never been the sexual behavior of public women that has spawned a scandal of Clinton/Lewinsky caliber; rather, women's "nannygates" and other similar misdeeds tend to be brought to public attention (2004, 20). Despite this, they argue, "sex scandals reliably police women's sexual behavior," reinforcing unpleasant cultural images of the slut (Lewinsky), the lovelorn and scorned liar (Kathleen Willey), or the shameless publicity-seeker (Jones) (Apostolidis and Williams 2004, 22).

The point, here, is that, for women in particular, public exposure continues to take a much different turn than it does for men. The scrutiny to which they are subjected and the foundations upon which their reputations are based remain different than those for men. If Bill Clinton is remembered as the president who received sexual favors while on the phone

³⁶For more on Tripp's "ugliness" and the national response to her, see Kipnis 2001.

conducting official business, he is also remembered as the charismatic leader who balanced the budget and who guided the United States through a period of great economic prosperity. Monica Lewinsky is remembered for her affair with the president, as well as for her weight problem; little mention was ever made of the quality of her work at the White House or the Pentagon, and the only discussion of her intellect came from denigrating it, as pundits speculated that she never could have been capable of drafting the infamous “talking points” memo.

In the next section, I move to a discussion of the way in which the perceived reputations of most of those involved in the scandal vary depending on who one asks. Comparing the relative instability of these reputations to the images put forth by Rousseau and Orwell, I suggest that there is more space for deviation from conventional norms of behavior in the contemporary United States than either of these thinkers might have been able to imagine. The result is a politics of reputation that has a somewhat less ominous tone, one of which, in some respects, Mill himself might approve.

Whatever Happened to Monica Lewinsky?: The Effect of the Scandal on Individuals

One of the most surprising observations I have made in thinking through the Clinton/Lewinsky imbroglio stems from the discovery that there is a stunning amount of disagreement in the literature and among people more generally about what reputations the major players in the scandal have been left with. For every commentator who suggests that Clinton will forever be seen as a lying, no-good philanderer, there is another who insists that the majority views him as a lonely sex addict who buckled under the presidential pressure. Lewinsky will be remembered as a vampy stalker who mercilessly seduced the president, as a young, impressionable woman who was seduced, herself, by Clinton’s power, or,

alternately, as the emotionally insecure girl-next-door who was refreshingly in touch with her own sexuality.³⁷ Paula Jones is either the big-haired publicity seeker or the woman with the courage to come forward. Even Kenneth Starr himself has dual reputations, depending on who you ask: the overzealoused independent counsel who went far beyond his bounds and the beleaguered public servant who worked tirelessly to expose corruption. The only exception may be Linda Tripp; while I feel certain that there's someone somewhere who would call her a national hero, the overwhelming consensus remains that she was a busybody and a backstabber.

What this observation suggests is that, in a diverse community such as ours, reputation does not always have the same monolithic character that a thinker such as Rousseau might have expected and even prescribed. People in Rousseau's ideal communities would have certainly been in agreement over their assessment of someone like, say, Monica Lewinsky; our contemporary reaction to her suggests a complicated multiplicity of moral viewpoints and judgments that creates a space for (dare I say it?) experimental living. In many, though certainly not all, ways, our relatively diverse community has become the sort of haven for difference of opinion and lifestyle for which Mill so strenuously argued. I don't mean to suggest that Mill himself would have approved of Clinton's behavior, nor do I want to argue that this haven has been created in the precise way that Mill prescribed (perhaps for the better given his elitist vision); still, a Monica Lewinsky in a great many contexts might have fared much worse than she did in ours.

³⁷Interestingly, Marjorie Garber points out that after Lewinsky's interview with Barbara Walters aired, the network's website "logged more inquiries about Monica's shade of lipstick than about any other single matter" (2001, 184). The next day, the lipstick sold out in New York City. It seems curious that so many women would work so hard to emulate someone who was truly ruined!

This brings me to my second point. For Rousseau's women, especially Sophie and Julie, whose sexual "offenses" were arguably less acute than Lewinsky's, the loss of their reputations meant stigma, isolation, and the destruction of their families and even, by extension, their political communities; the severity of the consequences of loss of reputation for these women necessitated the loss of their lives. Monica Lewinsky, on the other hand, went on to make money with her biography, television appearances, her handbag design business, and even a short stint as spokeswoman for diet company Jenny Craig. As Gallop and Berlant aptly note:

"It seems that there's something we're unused to thinking about, about the narrative in which you can be dragged through the mud and still be president, that sex doesn't ruin your life, that scandal doesn't ruin a public career. We're not in this narrative of when you fall, you fall. When you fall, you look silly, you fall on your ass, everyone laughs at you, Jay Leno makes jokes about you for six months, and you're still the president! Or you're still Monica, in fact going on TV and dating, living this complicated life that's open-ended. So we seem to be out of that tragic narrative of one false step and that's the end" (2001, 266-267).

Reputational consequences for individuals, it is clear, are not as dire, at least in this case, as they could be, as they once were, or as Rousseau wanted them to be.

At the same time, however, I do not want to overstate the preceding points. As I previously noted, commentators disagree about the extent to which Bill Clinton's historical reputation will be damaged by the scandal. It seems unlikely, however, that he will ever escape being associated with his affair and his subsequent impeachment. For a man who, as one scholar has noted "wants to be publicly validated for his accomplishments" (Renshon 2000, 51) and whose "aides mentioned time and time again that he was concerned about his historical legacy" (Smith 2004, 185), the damage caused by the scandal, however minimal it ends up being, must certainly be personally painful. Further, the humiliation suffered by

Monica Lewinsky is most definitely not something from which one fully recovers; no matter what one's overall assessment of Lewinsky's behavior, her name will never stop being associated with one incarnation of her sexuality—her affair with the president.³⁸ Finally, taking seriously, as I do, the human desire for esteem that Rousseau and the other early modern theorists of reputation identify, necessitates acknowledging the pain that all of those actors even temporarily sullied by the scandal had to endure.

It seems important to make one more point, here, before I move to my conclusion. While the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal has proven a fascinating case study for thinking through issues of gossip and reputation, it is also atypical in many ways. Most people's reputations never become quite so public, but then most people do not have the power and influence of those involved in the scandal. Bolstered by expensive lawyers, image consultants, public relations experts, and even pollsters, many of the central actors involved in the scandal had access to resources that few ordinary citizens could afford.³⁹ And, while I do certainly want to argue that reputational politics in the contemporary United States is much less dire than the kind practiced in Rousseau or Orwell's world, I also believe that it's integral to note that in different, less massively public, less high-powered and high-stakes contexts, the stakes, paradoxically, are often higher. The small-town teenager branded promiscuous may not necessarily be ruined forever, but she will most certainly encounter difficulties different from those experienced by Lewinsky. The local politician caught having an extramarital affair or the small business owner accused of cheating customers might very well suffer real material

³⁸I can't resist sharing a personal anecdote. While on vacation in one of the U.S. Virgin Islands, our taxi driver took us through a public market. He pointed out the window to a donkey, all dressed up in a flowered hat and wearing bright red lipstick, and said that one could purchase a kiss from the animal by paying her handler a dollar. The donkey's name, he informed us, was Monica Lewinsky.

³⁹Many of Lewinsky's entourage did, admittedly, work *pro bono*, convinced to do so, no doubt, by both the publicity and the gravity of the situation. The average person, however, would be hard pressed to find a top-caliber public relations consultant to help restore a tarnished reputation.

consequences because of their sullied reputations in a way that Bill Clinton, with his wealth, did not. This echoes a point made by Mill about those who can afford to lose their reputations and those who cannot; it is one that I want to argue we ought to keep in mind in thinking about Clinton and Lewinsky.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have used the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal to think about three interrelated facets of gossip and reputation. Exploring arguments about the detrimental effects of scandal politics, I argued that the gossip that both gives rise to and sustains scandal is, contrary to what many have suggested, capable itself of engendering conversations that, far from being merely trivial, are central to our communal life. Second, I suggested that the way in which reputation played out in the scandal reinforces the notion running throughout this project that women are differentially affected by reputation than are men. What this meant in the context of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal was that the women involved were, in most instances, reduced to their sexuality and their appearances. Even Hillary Clinton, whose reputation many have argued fared best of all of the women involved in the imbroglio, was rewarded not for her successful public ventures, but for her conformity to traditional norms of femininity that dictate discreteness, grace, and loyalty to one's husband. Finally, I argued that, far from reinforcing the notion of reputation as monolithic, the scandal illustrated the way in which reputation in the contemporary United States is more fragmented and less stable or universal than suggested by the stories of Rousseau's heroines and Orwell's characters.

CONCLUSION

The question asked in my title, inspired by Wollstonecraft's passionate indictment of the reputational imperatives to which women are subjected, is whether or not reputation and gossip are "specious poisons" in the realm of democratic politics. Unfortunately, there is no tidy resolution to this question, even after all of the work that I've done. Wollstonecraft is obviously quite clear in her assessment of reputation and, for Rousseau, whether reputation and gossip are poisonous or not is entirely dependent upon the context in which they are deployed. Mill's appraisal of reputation's value is murkier; he acknowledges that people care what others think even as he urges those who have the means to ignore public opinion as much as possible, creating communities of support for unconventional opinions and lifestyles. He seems, then, to accept the reality of the desire for reputation while insisting that social arrangements must provide a space for individuals to resist it. For Orwell, whose character Flory is paralyzed by what others think, the desire for reputation is a manifestation of weakness that can inhibit one's ability to speak out against injustice, while reputation and the gossip that constitutes it work to solidify the oppression of the powerless. And my analysis of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal suggests that sexual reputation, in particular, continues to be deployed in ways that differentially affect women; it also points to the vital communicative function that gossip plays in our political and communal lives.

Rather than providing a simple answer to the question of reputation and gossip's normative value, the lessons learned from Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, the Mills, Orwell, and the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal complicate our understandings of reputation and gossip,

introducing both into the realm of politics in a way that has been largely absent from contemporary political theory. With ramifications for communal life, for gender politics, for individual liberty, and for relationships of power, reputation and gossip certainly pose great dangers: the ability to eviscerate human relationships and communities, to introduce, reify, and support oppression, to stifle individuals' life choices and personal development, and to serve as agents of social and political control, just to name a few. But there are also aspects of reputation and gossip that offer great potential for shaping our communities and for providing a language in which to talk about issues that are vital to the fabric of our social and political lives.

Determining what this duality—the simultaneous danger and potential that reputation and gossip possess—means for the democratic practice of deploying reputation and gossip is, not surprisingly, quite difficult. Rousseau's assertion that the effects of gossip and the desire for reputation are context-dependent is incredibly convincing, and is borne out not only in his description of the different results of reputation in commercial society and places such as Geneva, but also in the consequences that I have identified of his particular reputational prescriptions for women. It is borne out in Mill's insistence that an individual's social and economic situation affects his ability (and ought to affect his willingness) to defy the dictates of reputation, to cease caring about public opinion. It is borne out in Orwell's description of a place in which the loss of reputation means very different things to some people than to others, as well as in the very real effects of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, in which the bases of reputation were often quite different for men and women. Each case, it seems, might be judged differently, based on the particular situation, with careful attention to the power dynamics at play, the actors involved, their locations within the larger social hierarchy, and

the costs and benefits of utilizing reputation and gossip for both the individuals and the community in question.

Still, I want to argue that my project begins to point us toward recognizing better and worse ways of employing the desire for reputation, in particular. For people such as Rousseau's women and Orwell's Veraswami, the pursuit of reputation had less to do with a simple natural desire for esteem and more to do with survival; the mechanism through which reputation worked was one that was punitive, that served to control and exclude. But Rousseau also provides us with a different, more positive vision of the way in which the desire for reputation, if we recognize it, might be used to inspire the qualities and behaviors that could make our community better. By holding up certain objects of esteem, as Rousseau suggests, we can use the desire for reputation to motivate people, giving them a path to achieve their desire in a way that is constructive, rather than punishing. And far from being two sides of the same reputational coin, as some critics might respond, these two different ways of deploying reputation can, in fact, exist independently. Mill teaches us this in his explicit recognition that there is a very real difference between politely withholding esteem and actively shunning or castigating those who do not live up to communal standards. In other words, I am arguing that we can and should use the desire for reputation to encourage behaviors deemed important for our democratic political community without simultaneously basing anyone's lives and livelihoods upon their reputations.

The role of gossip in achieving this vision lies partly in the very important information that gossip provides about other people's private behavior. Still, part of gossip's power is in its chaos, its inability to be controlled. For this reason, it is more difficult to envision attempting to channel gossip in the way that I have suggested the desire for

reputation ought to be channeled. Purposefully using gossip in an attempt to control others or to gain power is almost always dangerous, both because of its painful effects on individuals and because it is unpredictable—just ask Linda Tripp. Yet while anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists may disagree about gossip's social or psychological purpose, they all acknowledge, some tacitly and others explicitly, that gossip is a permanent feature of human social interactions. Rather than denigrating gossip as trivial, my analysis suggests that, whenever and however it flares up, we ought to pay attention to the discussion that ensues as both potentially fruitful and indicative of larger issues that are central to our communal lives.

Ultimately, I agree with Rousseau and Mill that reputation and gossip are not inherently toxic, are not innately healthy, and are not, in and of themselves, anything in between. Gossip, reputation, and the desire to have others think well of us just *are*; it is up to us to decide how to structure our communities in ways that mitigate their dangers and embrace their potential. Doing so, however, requires beginning to acknowledge their existence, their relevance to political life, and their destructive and constructive powers. It is my modest hope that this is what my project has accomplished.

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